LV YE QIAN HE
THE WIFE COMES FIRST
QI WEI SHANG
3

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THE WIFE COMES FIRST

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NOVEL

3

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 70:
Trouble Strikes Again

AS THE CURTAIN TO the carriage door was raised, Song Lingxin took the lead and crouched down gracefully to bow in front of it. “I respectfully welcome Your High—ah!” A tiger suddenly bounded out the open door, scaring her.

Her scream startled Li’l Sunbeam, and he roared at her in protest. Ge Ruoyi stepped forward, picked up the cub, and stood out of the way.

“What’s all this noise about?!” Jing Shao stepped to the front of the carriage and jumped off. He only glanced briefly at the woman standing nearby before turning to offer his hand to help Mu Hanzhang down.

Mu Hanzhang was dressed in a winter cotton coat of sapphire blue with a wide-sleeved gauze robe on top, making him appear all the more elegant and noble. The trials of war had washed away the subtle trace of melancholy that once clung to him, and like the Latent Radiance drawn from its sheath, the sight of him captivated all those present.

The servants in the estate were stunned, and Miaoxi whispered to Zhixi, “The princely consort is only getting more and more handsome.”

“Your Highness, I’ve been desperately looking forward to your return!” Yun Zhu dashed over, beside himself with excitement.

Mu Hanzhang shot a look at Song Lingxin, feeling a vague sense of unease. He turned and looked at Jing Shao, standing next to him. Jing Shao had turned to him at the same time, and he could tell that his consort was upset. He hadn’t felt this way before, but laying eyes on this concubine made him feel incredibly guilty.

She’d completely slipped his mind, but the moment he laid eyes on her, he remembered giving the order that she was not allowed out of the west wing without his say-so. What was she doing standing here?

He immediately snapped, “Who gave you permission to come out of your quarters?”

“Your Highness…” Song Lingxin had dressed up to come greet him, never expecting him to call her out on it right away.

She’d hoped Prince Cheng had forgotten about his order. The mere sight of her, however, set him off.

Just as he was about to lose his temper, Mu Hanzhang grabbed his hand. “Let’s go inside; it’s windy out here.” He squeezed the center of Jing Shao’s palm.

What would people think if they saw Prince Cheng scolding a concubine in front of his estate? Besides, Hao Dadao was watching!

Jing Shao shot Duofu a glare and reached out to wrap his arm around his consort’s waist. “Let’s go.”

After updating Hao Dadao on what was happening, the two went inside. Of course, Hao Dadao didn’t have the right to comment on the prince’s private affairs. Master Yun personally led him to the guest quarters to get some rest.

Duofu scrunched up his doughy face and turned to Song Lingxin, who stood at the edge of the group, her face ashen.

“Lady Song, you’d best get back to the west wing. Please don’t make my life more difficult.”

***

NOT MUCH HAD CHANGED in the estate in the half a year they’d been gone, but being home again after so long made the place feel oddly both strange and familiar.

Having ridden in a carriage all day, and after all the fuss at the city gates, the couple was feeling quite fatigued. The servants had already prepared hot water, so they took a bath together.

Jing Shao sidled up to his consort for some physical affection, only to be pushed back over to the other side. Undeterred, he tried again, snuggling close.

“I’m tired. Don’t have the energy.” Mu Hanzhang attempted to shove him away.

Jing Shao nibbled gently on that fair, smooth shoulder and murmured, “I won’t go all the way, so just relax, hmm?”

This kind of sweet talk from Jing Shao was never credible. Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips, but he let it slide, allowing Jing Shao’s wandering hands to make their way to his chest.

“About Lady Song…what do you…mm, plan to do?” he asked.

Mu Hanzhang leaned back and rested his head on Jing Shao’s shoulder, staring at the colorful mural of clouds painted on the ceiling beams above. Life on the road may have been hard, but he’d felt far less troubled. Suddenly returning to ornate surroundings with carved beams and painted rafters was actually a bit hard to get used to.

“Are you jealous?” Jing Shao’s hands paused for a moment, and with a soft chuckle, he took the tip of one ear into his mouth.

“You are a prince. It is only natural for you to have three wives and four concubines. This one…ah!” Mu Hanzhang cried out as fingers suddenly thrust into his body. He bit his lower lip; even though the hot water eased things a little, being penetrated so suddenly inevitably brought some pain.

“I forbid you from saying such things!” Jing Shao commanded, rather displeased. Words like that made him feel as though he’d gone back to the first days after his rebirth. After all they’d been through together, why did Junqing still insist on speaking this way?

His brows furrowing, Mu Hanzhang endured the way those unlubricated fingers twisted around inside his body, biting his lips and refusing to make a sound.

Jing Shao’s heart began to ache, and when he thought back to what Mu Hanzhang said earlier, he realized that it was merely a jealous remark. Suddenly brightening at the thought, Jing Shao leaned in to press a kiss to Mu Hanzhang’s cheek and gentled the movement of his hand. Finding that familiar spot, he started to knead and massage it.

Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips tightly together and tried his best to stay quiet, but as Jing Shao's hand moved faster and faster, breathy, low moans began to spill from his lips.

While Jing Shao's fingers persistently pressed against that same place inside Mu Hanzhang, Jing Shao wrapped his other hand around Mu Hanzhang's cock, which had already begun to rear its head. He put his lips around the shell of Mu Hanzhang's ear and panted softly at it, "If you satisfy your husband this evening, I'll dismiss her by tomorrow. What do you say?"

Mu Hanzhang moaned, twisting to pull his ear away from that ticklish breath. "If Your Highness isn't satisfied, you can always go see your concubine—ah!" Two fingers coated with cool fragrant balm pushed into his body again to draw circles and grind against his prostate.

"What's to be done, then? This Prince can't even get hard looking at anyone but you now." Smiling, Jing Shao lifted him up just a little.

"You—ah…" At these vulgar words, Mu Hanzhang's pink-tinged cheeks grew even redder. Just as he was about to continue speaking, the hands that had just been supporting him suddenly let go, and his body dropped uncontrollably onto Jing Shao's hard cock. It was angled just right, so without further ado, it thrust straight into his body.

"It hurts…" Mu Hanzhang leaned against Jing Shao's shoulder and cried out softly. Honestly, Jing Shao had prepared him rather well just now, so it wasn't particularly painful. The soft complaint sounded more like he was whining a little for attention.

Hearing this moan, Jing Shao let out a muffled groan. He clutched Mu Hanzhang closer, grabbed his chin, and kissed him hard. "Junqing, you've gotten so naughty."

"Hmm?" sounded Mu Hanzhang's quizzical hum. His mind had gone completely blank, and he couldn't quite process the meaning behind Jing Shao's comment.

The lost look on his face made Jing Shao smile, glad to know that his Junqing had finally learned to relax at times like these. He wrapped his arms around Mu Hanzhang's waist and began to move in earnest.

Zhixi, who'd come to deliver their meal, stopped the servants at the door and told them to put the food down and leave at once. She only took one look at the tightly shut door to the inner chamber before she, too, withdrew from the rooms with reddened cheeks. When she came out, she ran into Ge Ruoyi, who'd come to deliver the tiger. Zhixi stepped forward to greet her with a smile.

"Miss, Their Highnesses are resting inside right now, so it's best if you come back later."

After taking one look at this girl who had a kind smile for her but viewed her with obvious hostility, Ge Ruoyi inwardly muttered, *How predictable.*

She adjusted her hold on Li'l Sunbeam and said with a soft chuckle, "Miss, there's no need to be so polite. My name is Ruoyi, and right now I am the princely consort's personal maid. I'm counting on your guidance in the future."

At this, the animosity in Zhixi's eyes faded considerably. She'd assumed Ge Ruoyi was some beauty His Highness had found on his trip, but instead, she'd turned out to be a woman taken in by the princely consort to serve as his maid.

In the inner chamber, Jing Shao remained entirely unaware of the little squabble between the maids. He kissed Mu Hanzhang near the corner of his eye with satisfaction, then carried him out of the bathtub.

Mu Hanzhang draped himself over Jing Shao's shoulder, sore and weak all over. He was already exhausted from the trip, but now he didn't even want to lift a single finger.

"You must be hungry. I'll tell them to set the table." Jing Shao laid Mu Hanzhang on the bed and tucked him in.

"I don't feel like eating anymore," he mumbled, turning over to face the inside of the bed.

Jing Shao tugged on his underrobe, then wrapped the quilt around Mu Hanzhang and kissed him. "At least eat a little bit." With that, he got up and left the inner chamber.

Before long, Zhixi came in and placed a bowl of rice porridge and two side dishes on the small table next to the bed and withdrew with her head lowered.

Jing Shao gleefully dug Mu Hanzhang out of bed and sat him in his lap, then started feeding him one spoonful at a time with the bowl in his hand.

“If anyone says anything sarcastic at morning court tomorrow, don’t say anything rash.” Mu Hanzhang ate the first mouthful, then reached out for the spoon, only for Jing Shao to move it out of his reach.

“Mm-hmm. I must go by the Prince Rui Estate tomorrow morning after court and let him know about King Huainan as soon as possible.” Jing Shao ate a spoonful himself, then scooped up another serving and fed it to Mu Hanzhang.

“Before you do that, be sure to go to the Rite of Luan Palace and see Mother,” Mu Hanzhang said with a shake of his head, indicating he didn’t want any more. “And I’ll go to the Beiwei Estate tomorrow.”

Before visiting anyone else, one ought to visit one’s own parents after returning from a long journey. Besides, the fact that he hadn’t heard from his mother for a long time made him feel a little uneasy.

Jing Shao mumbled an affirmative and finished the rest of the food himself.

***

THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao put on his moon-blue imperial prince court attire and stood once again in the center of the golden Grand Hall.

Emperor Hongzheng was very pleased with how Jing Shao was able to sweep the two vassal kings away like a gale dispersing clouds; for once, the look on his face was not stern, and he even praised Jing Shao highly before all of the court officials.

“It is all thanks to your foresight, Father. Your son was merely carrying out your orders,” said Jing Shao modestly with his head bowed. He

then proceeded to give over all credit of his victory to the great general he'd conveniently acquired.

Jing Shao's conduct had indeed satisfied Emperor Hongzheng. He thought time on the battlefield had tempered his son, making him significantly more levelheaded. He then summoned Hao Dadao to an audience before the court, and upon learning that his ancestor was General Hao from the former dynasty, immediately bestowed upon him the title of Valiant General.

The officials of the court sang his praises as well, but the fourth prince, Jing Yu, kept his head low, and the expression on his face shifted constantly, like a wild storm.

The first prince hadn't yet returned from his assault on the Southern Barbarians, but Jing Shao had already pacified two feudatories. And now he'd somehow brought a formidable general back to the imperial court! Jing Yu met the eyes of an official across from him and gave a signal.

Jing Chen calmly watched his younger brother stand at the center of the Grand Hall, his face betraying no emotion.

"Your Majesty, there is indeed much to celebrate in Prince Cheng's glorious return to the capital in triumph, but while merits should be justly rewarded, faults should be judged with even greater clarity!" came the voice of an official.

Jing Shao stood straighter and averted his eyes, not responding.

Ages passed without a single word of rebuke from Prince Cheng, and the throne room plunged abruptly into silence, leaving the official standing there rather awkwardly.

He had no choice but to grit his teeth and keep talking. "As for what he should be punished for, this one believes that the vice minister of war would know better than anyone else."

With that, the expressions on everyone's faces shifted. The vice minister of war, Song An, was the father of Prince Cheng's concubine, Song Lingxin. Were they going to force *him* to accuse Prince Cheng of wrongdoing?

As Song An shakily stepped forward, Jing Chen glanced over at him, the shadows deepening in his gaze.

“To report to Your Majesty, although he is a part of the harem, Princely Consort Cheng secretly joined Prince Cheng on the battlefield without permission, which is against the law,” said Song An, drenched in cold sweat.

“That is correct.” Earl Yongchang also stepped forward and declared, “Princely Consort Cheng has disregarded his role as a wife and meddled in state affairs as if it were a game. This one believes that such conduct should be severely punished. Otherwise, if Prince Cheng were to set this precedent, all officers would want to bring their wives along with them when they march off to war. It is a complete loss of decorum!”

Chapter 71:
The Bitter Fruit of Folly

JING SHAO TURNED SLIGHTLY to look at Earl Yongchang. When he heard the words “severely punished,” murderous intent flashed across his eyes. What despicable, petty villains. Unable to find fault with him, they were instead turning their knives on his Junqing.

The smile faded from Emperor Hongzheng’s face, but he said nothing as he watched to see how Jing Shao would react.

“Princely Consort Cheng did not travel with the troops for selfish reasons,” Jing Shao explained, recalling the advice his consort had given him the night before, and he held his temper as well as he could. “He is exceptionally wise and served as the army’s strategist.”

“Your Highness, is this a jest?” Earl Yongchang asked, thinking that he was quite in the right. With a sneer, he said, “There are countless knowledgeable literati in the world, so out of everyone you could have chosen as a strategist, why did you choose your own incomparably beautiful princely consort?”

His words couldn’t have been more malicious. They implied that Jing Shao was merely driven by lust, and in implying this, he’d completely dishonored Mu Hanzhang in the process.

Jing Shao’s fists were already clenched so tightly that his knuckles cracked, and at this insult to his wife, he finally lost it and swung his fist at Earl Yongchang’s aged face. “Watch your filthy mouth in front of This Prince!”

One punch from Prince Cheng threw the unprepared Earl Yongchang to the floor.

“Jing Shao!” Seeing the situation escalate, Jing Chen rushed forward to pull Jing Shao away. Duke Mao, who stood near Earl Yongchang, quickly came forward to pick him up. A sudden uproar broke out in the Grand Hall.

“Shut up, the lot of you!” Emperor Hongzheng shouted, rubbing his temples.

“Your Majesty, please quell your anger!”

The court officials dropped to their knees at once, naturally accompanied by the two brothers standing in the center. But Jing Shao was still livid, his expression making it clear that he’d kick Earl Yongchang if he were allowed to stand up again.

Emperor Hongzheng gave a few more verbal chastisements, commanding Jing Chen to take Jing Shao back to where he was supposed to be standing before he allowed everyone else to rise. However, his reprimands were related to how noisy everyone was being and didn’t mention Prince Cheng’s punch. It was this that clued everyone in on the fact that His Majesty intended to take Prince Cheng’s side, and so they kept their mouths shut and didn’t dare venture further into the topic.

Jing Chen lightly nudged his younger brother, giving him a look that said, *“Go on and play the victim already.”*

Jing Shao took the hint and fell on his knees at the foot of the steps with a thud.

“Father, your son will not ask for any reward for suppressing the rebellion. I only ask that you not punish my princely consort! In the process of protecting the twenty thousand soldiers in the main camp, Princely Consort Cheng was wounded by King Dongnan’s mounted archers, and he has not yet recovered from his injuries—he couldn’t possibly bear any punishment!” He was choked up with emotion, and he kowtowed three times in a row. When he thought back to how Junqing had fainted from the pain, it still felt like a knife twisting in his heart.

The court officials all fell silent. Prince Cheng had pacified two feudatories in just a few months, a truly remarkable achievement. As he was an imperial prince, there were no further titles that could be granted to him, but if such great military achievements ended up clouded by an unfounded accusation such as this, it would be truly disheartening for those who served the throne. To think: As the legitimate son of the late empress, Prince Cheng had distinguished himself in battle only to be forced to take a man for a wife, and after finally accepting his fate, he’d have to give up on any reward just to protect his princely consort. Even those in the reformist

faction who were neutral in regard to the succession fight couldn’t help but feel sympathetic, fearing being treated with the same level of ingratitude.

The furrow between Emperor Hongzheng’s brows gradually deepened as he swept his gaze across everyone’s faces, finally settling on the silent fourth prince, head bowed without a word. He could sense his father’s gaze but dared not look up.

Seeing that no one else wanted to speak up, Jing Chen slowly began, “Your son believes…that since Princely Consort Cheng is a man, he should not be censured too strictly purely for being away from the inner harem.”

After Jing Chen’s addition, Minister Sun of the Ministry of War also stepped out of the line. “To report to Your Majesty, from what this one has heard, Princely Consort Cheng’s strategies played a crucial role in pacifying two feudatories in the space of a few months.”

The postwar memorials written by each commander of the three regional troops had already been delivered to the capital, and they were full of praise for their strategist.

“Your Majesty, I’m kind of rough around the edges and don’t understand all these protocols and such, but if it wasn’t for our strategist’s brilliant plans, I would never have been able to break through the tiger and crane pass, and there’s no way General Zhao could have taken Shengjing Pass in just a few days’ time,” Hao Dadao couldn’t help adding, immediately confirming Minister Sun’s words.

“This one can verify that it was purely due to Princely Consort Cheng’s hard work that we were able to discover the embezzlement of military funds,” said Xiao Yuan, who had already been promoted to vice minister of personnel, also stepping forward. At the same time, the newly appointed minister of revenue stepped up to say that the success of this audit was all thanks to the strategist of the vanguard battalion, whose notes were invaluable.

Aside from Duke Mao and Earl Yongchang, every other court official stepped forward one after another to express their agreement.

“It was we who personally granted Princely Consort Cheng permission to leave the capital,” announced Emperor Hongzheng coolly.

Stunned as if he'd been struck by lightning, Earl Yongchang turned to the fourth prince. Song An was already trembling like chaff being sifted, and Jing Yu himself immediately paled. He knew full well that Father was aware of Princely Consort Cheng's departure from the capital, and he had only planned this act to give Father an excuse not to heavily reward Prince Cheng and in turn curb Jing Shao's arrogance a little. But it had become apparent that Father was determined to shield Jing Shao to the end.

"Princely Consort Cheng, Mu Hanzhang, became a provincial graduate at seventeen. He possesses exceptional intellect, and we had specially appointed him to assist Prince Cheng," Emperor Hongzheng said, his deep, unreadable gaze landing on the fourth prince before sweeping over the presumptuous Earl Yongchang. "For pacifying two feudatories in only four months, the primary credit should be given to Princely Consort Cheng. He is to be granted a marquisate. The Ministry of Rites will select a suitable title and choose a date for the investiture ceremony."

When a man married into the imperial family, he became a partial imperial descendant and could be granted a peerage for rendering meritorious service. However, few members of the imperial family had ever taken men as wives, and even when they had, none of those wives had rendered exemplary service to the empire. As a result, this provision in the administrative code had been largely forgotten.

***

As the chaos unfolded during morning court, the atmosphere within the Beiwei Estate was even more bizarre.

Once Mu Hanzhang alighted from his carriage and walked into the estate, he found the whole place shrouded in a hush that permeated every corner of the property. Even the servants in the front courtyard seemed to be holding their breath and taking brisk steps, each of them looking rather nervous.

Frowning, Mu Hanzhang questioned Steward Wang, who'd come to guide him inside. "Did something happen here?"

Steward Wang was the chief steward of the Beiwei Estate's front court. Why had he been the only one to come greet him at the door? What had happened to all the other servants?

Steward Wang peered left and right before whispering, "To be frank with Your Highness, the eldest young master has fallen gravely ill, and he's been bedridden. Lady Du is in very low spirits."

Mu Hanzhang understood right away. Marquise Beiwei must be in a foul mood at the moment, and to avoid being the target of her rage, the servants were trying to keep as low a profile as possible. Mu Hanzhang took out a jade Buddha and offered it to the steward. "This is a gift I got for you on this trip, Uncle Wang."

"Young Master, you're much too generous!" Steward Wang beamed and took it with both hands.

Mu Hanzhang smiled without responding, continuing on his way toward the inner court of the estate. Marquis Beiwei should still be at morning court at this hour, so he should first go pay his respects to his principal mother.

"Young Master, this way," Steward Wang insisted, pointing toward Marquis Beiwei's study.

"Father didn't attend court this morning?" Mu Hanzhang frowned again.

When he found Marquis Beiwei reading in the study safe and sound, he felt his heart sink. Jing Shao was back at court today—to think his father had claimed illness and stayed home instead of attending to praise his accomplishments! When he thought of that…he couldn't help but worry about Jing Shao.

Marquis Beiwei, Mu Jin, was very pleased to see his son return from his trip. After chatting with him for a while, Mu Hanzhang presented his father with a legendary sword.

"Is this the Splendid Edge?" Marquis Beiwei looked at the razor-sharp blade in his hand, visibly thrilled to lay eyes on it. He held it up against the drawing of the sacred artifacts on the wall.

“I’m not an expert, but that’s what His Highness told me,” Mu Hanzhang said gently.

“Wonderful. Wonderful!”

Mu Jin admired the legendary sword with delight for a long while. When he looked up, he found Mu Hanzhang standing obediently at his side, with his head bowed and his eyes averted. But when he realized that his son felt even more refined and reserved than he’d been before he left home, Mu Jin couldn’t help but sigh heavily.

“Father, is something troubling you?” Mu Hanzhang asked as he refilled his father’s cup.

With mixed emotions written across his face, Marquis Beiwei accepted the tea. He sighed again, helplessly. “Things have not been peaceful at home lately. Go check in on your mother, then come back to have a drink or two with me at High Noon.”

Mu Hanzhang hummed in assent. Still, he was first required to pay respects to his principal mother.

Marquise Beiwei looked noticeably more haggard than he remembered, yet she forced herself to maintain her composure while she spoke to him. However, there was something rather off about the way she looked at him, for there was both wariness and venom in her gaze.

Unwilling to stay any longer in his principal mother’s quarters, Mu Hanzhang exchanged a few pleasantries, then left a gift and went to see his mother.

Now that Lady Qiu had been elevated to secondary wife, she had two young maids, Yancui and Qiulan. They were both overjoyed to see the second young master.

“Where’s my mother?” The worry in his heart grew even stronger despite himself, causing him to frown once more.

“Madam Qiu is feeling a bit unwell,” Qiulan said. Seeing a grave look come over Mu Hanzhang’s face, she quickly added, “But it’s really not all that serious. Young Master, please go inside and see her.”

The doors and windows were kept tightly shut during the winter, and charcoal glowed in the brass stove, heating the room. Lady Qiu leaned

against the headboard in the bed with a warm-colored bed-curtain hanging over it, embroidering a coin purse. Her aged but still captivating countenance glowed under candlelight, the scene the very picture of peace and beauty.

“Mom.” Mu Hanzhang’s worried heart came down from its perch in his throat.

Lady Qiu looked up at the sound, and only then noticed her son, who’d already made it to the side of her bed. She seemed to freeze, before she beamed at the surprise of seeing him.

“Hanzhang, you’re back! Quick, come over here, and let Mom have a look at you.”

Mu Hanzhang sat down next to the bed and took his mother’s hand. The warmth and softness of it, glowing with health, finally made him feel more settled.

“How are you feeling? Did you ask an imperial physician to examine you yet?”

When nobles fell ill, their only option was to send for an imperial physician, but the Academy of Medicine only had so many physicians, and they barely had enough time for those who lived in the palace. Unless it was an acute illness, an imperial physician often could not be summoned right away.

Seemingly a little uncomfortable to be questioned, she mumbled, “I’ve already seen one. It’s nothing serious.”

“Mom!” Her reluctance only made Mu Hanzhang grow anxious once more. “What on earth is going on?”

Lady Qiu lowered her gaze but didn’t respond, changing the subject instead. “On a battlefield, blades don’t distinguish friend from foe. I’ve been worried sick; my heart’s always in my throat thinking that something might happen to you. Let me see if you’ve been hurt, will you?”

“I’ll send for an imperial physician right away.” Since his mother was refusing to explain, Mu Hanzhang rose as if to leave, but Lady Qiu’s hand snaked out to grab him and stop him.

“Aiyah, why are you learning to jump right into action like Prince Cheng?!” Lady Qiu complained playfully with her hand on his sleeve, but she was blushing. “I haven’t sent for a doctor yet, but I know what’s going on with myself.”

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together, but he sat down again and watched his mother quietly for a moment before everything finally clicked.

“Mother, am I…going to have a baby sibling soon?”

Lady Qiu couldn’t help but blush deeper; it was truly embarrassing to be discussing such things with her son. “That’s my guess, but I’m not entirely sure. Don’t tell anyone—no one knows yet.”

“That’s wonderful.” Mu Hanzhang’s expression gradually relaxed as joy uplifted him.

This proved that his mother had been doing well lately and was in good heath, for that was the only way she could have conceived again at this stage of life. But when he recalled what Steward Wang had said earlier, he came back down to earth, and the smile faded from his face.

“There seems to be some unrest in the estate of late, so let’s not tell anyone for now. I will get an imperial physician I’m familiar with to check on you tomorrow,” he said.

Lady Qiu grew serious as well. She whispered, “It’s precisely because I’m worried about the unrest that I didn’t dare send for a doctor.”

Chapter 72:
News

“THE HEIR WAS PERFECTLY healthy the last time I saw him. So how did he suddenly fall ill out of nowhere?” Mu Hanzhang asked, carefully tucking his mother in.

Lady Qiu glanced around, her voice still low, and replied, “On the 7th of the Twelfth Month, the heir went out drinking with Huafeng and Yangwen, but somehow, they all fell into a moat.”

Mu Hanzhang frowned at the news. The 7th of the Twelfth Month fell on the third nine-day period of winter, and undoubtedly, they must have been heavily stricken by the cold if they’d fallen into frozen water. But why would three men go near the river in such cold weather?

“Third Madam was crying her heart out. Huafeng’s feet were frostbitten, and Yangwen is still bedridden to this day. But as for how the heir is doing, no one knows. The imperial physician came to check on him, but the Madam won’t even talk about it.”

Secretly she took some pleasure in their suffering. It was these same three boys who had pushed Hanzhang into the pond and left his meridians damaged. Now, it seemed that they were finally getting what they deserved.

“But how did they all end up falling into the river like that?” Mu Hanzhang thought that something felt fishy about this whole thing.

Lady Qiu glanced at the window before lowering her voice further to say, “I heard they offended someone from the criminal underground. They had sacks wrapped around their heads, got beaten up, then were tossed into the river. They floundered for quite a while after that before getting fished out.”

Mu Hanzhang instantly knew that couldn’t be the full truth. He’d heard about those kinds of people from Jing Shao; they would never have been this brazen unless they’d had no idea that Mu Lingbao was Marquis Beiwei’s heir.

“Have they been caught?”

“How?” Lady Qiu shook her head. “The boys said they were going to go drinking, but they were actually visiting brothels behind their families’ backs. None of them brought a single servant. There was no way to know who beat them up.”

The three of them were notorious privileged scions to begin with and had offended more than a few people. When the families had started looking into it, they didn’t even know where to begin.

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AFTER MORNING COURT, Jing Shao ignored the court officials’ congratulations, then let his brother know what he was doing before he headed off to the Rite of Luan Palace. It just so happened that the fourth prince was also heading in that direction, so Jing Shao curved the corners of his lips up in a smile and called out, “Fourth Brother, are you also off to pay your respects to Mother?”

Jing Yu paused, took a deep breath, then turned around with a pleasant expression and bowed. “Your Highness, I haven’t congratulated you on your princely consort being granted a marquisate yet.”

“Tch, that’s not something to congratulate me for,” Jing Shao said with a fake smile. “Once a man has a peerage, I can’t divorce him whenever I want any more, and it naturally means I won’t be able to take another concubine either.”

“Is that so? I’m actually not familiar with all these rules and regulations,” said the fourth prince, forcing an awkward smile.

Jing Yu had originally thought Princely Consort Cheng gaining a peerage would pose a threat to himself, but that didn’t exactly appear to be the case. Now that Song An had thoroughly offended Jing Shao, it seemed unlikely that he would ever show favor to that man’s daughter again. If Jing Shao couldn’t take another concubine, and he still didn’t have any children yet…

“Hmph,” Jing Shao grunted noncommittally.

The other day, when he’d noticed his consort reading *Laws of the Chen Empire*, he’d sidled up next to him and also started reading it out of curiosity. When he’d discovered that a gentleman wife receiving a peerage meant that his husband was no longer allowed to take new concubines, he’d thought about killing off Mu Lingbao and seizing Marquis Beiwei’s peerage for his Junqing to give himself an excuse. This title being conferred as a reward actually saved him a lot of trouble.

Jing Shao and Jing Yu put on a show of brotherly harmony as they arrived together at the Rite of Luan Palace. The empress consort still had on that same kind, motherly expression, even remarking that Jing Shao looked even sturdier now after being away, which made him break out in goose bumps.

He didn’t bring any gifts for the empress consort, only mentioning how austere life at a military camp was. The empress consort, as expected, showed a great deal of concern at this, and she presented him with a lot of good stuff, all of which Jing Shao accepted without reservation.

“We had a bit of a misunderstanding with Princely Consort Cheng the day before your departure, so now that you’re both back, you should tell him to come visit sometime. We’ve gathered quite a few gifts for him during the Spring Festival,” said the empress consort, all smiles.

“Then your son thanks Mother in advance on behalf of Princely Consort Cheng.” Jing Shao gave a half-hearted bow and said a few more polite perfunctory things before leaving with all the gifts the empress consort had bestowed upon him.

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HIDDEN IN HER ROBES, the empress consort’s hands were clenched so tight they were turning white. “The nerve of that boy to come empty-handed!”

“He searched the estates of both King Dongnan and King Xinan. There’s no way he didn’t find anything,” said the fourth prince with contempt.

He had planned to use anything Jing Shao brought to Mother to file a formal complaint against him for embezzlement. But he never could have imagined that Jing Shao’s skin was thicker than the city walls, and he would actually come empty-handed. He’d even managed to walk off with a bunch of stuff!

“This is all trivial,” said the empress consort, picking up her teacup and taking a sip. “What did His Majesty grant him today at court?”

“Father didn’t really reward him at all, but he conferred the title of marquis onto Princely Consort Cheng. He wanted the Ministry of Rites to choose a title and an auspicious day for the ceremony.” As the fourth prince said this, his expression darkened without his knowledge. The way Father had handled the situation meant he intended to protect Jing Shao no matter what.

“What did you say?” The empress consort’s voice shot up a register.

His Majesty was already displeased with Jing Yu over what had happened with the Ministry of Revenue. The empress consort had asked her younger brother, Earl Yongchang, to speak up today to provide His Majesty with an excuse not to reward Jing Shao and to improve his opinion of the fourth prince’s filial piety. She’d never imagined that His Majesty wouldn’t appreciate it at all.

Now, even a fool would know that the fourth prince was behind the sowing of this discord. Jing Yu’s political standing in the court would likely suffer greatly, and in a couple of days, rumors might start circulating that the fourth prince had lost the emperor’s favor!

The fourth prince was infuriated as well. He’d read that look of reproach in Earl Yongchang’s eyes loud and clear when morning court ended.

Earl Yongchang had grabbed him and rambled on, *“Your Highness, I’m your uncle, you know? How could you do this to me?”*

Jing Yu couldn’t help but scoff in disdain—if he’d let him know that Father had agreed to let Princely Consort Cheng leave with the army, how

would he have convinced his timid and excessively cautious uncle to take the lead?

“No, he must not be granted a marquisate. If he is, it will cement the accusation that you were sowing discord, and who knows how that rumor would develop.” The empress rested her forehead in one hand, a deep furrow between her brows.

His Majesty was clearly troubled in regard to Prince Cheng’s overwhelming victory, so how could his stance have changed all of a sudden? Could it be that she’d misread the emperor’s heart?

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STEPPING OUT OF the palace gates, Jing Shao first instructed the attendants to give all the gifts the empress had bestowed onto him to Yun Song, then got on Shadow and left for the Prince Rui Estate at a leisurely trot.

“Where’s Sister-in-Law?” Jing Shao looked around the room. Usually, whenever he visited his brother, Princely Consort Rui was always there, ready with tea and refreshments.

“We had another son just before the New Year, and she’s still in postpartum confinement,” Jing Chen said offhandedly.

“Is that so? Then, congratulations, Brother,” said Jing Shao with a smile.

Out of all the princes, Jing Chen was the most fruitful, with three sons and two daughters, something Emperor Hongzheng was very pleased about.

“The investiture ceremony for his marquisate must not be too grand. When you get back, let Hanzhang know,” Jing Chen advised.

He was in charge of the Ministry of Rites, so naturally, he also had to plan the investiture ceremony. Jing Shao was riding high at the moment, and the empire was still at war, so it would be best not to draw too much attention to them.

Jing Shao nodded. Even though he would love to hold a grand coronation ceremony to give his consort his moment in the sun, Junqing wouldn't enjoy that at all; he would be far happier if they kept it simple.

"It hasn't been long since the King Huainan of this generation inherited his peerage, so I actually haven't met him before," said Jing Chen thoughtfully after listening to his younger brother's account of events. "This is an important decision, so we should be cautious. After the Spring Festival, I'll ask Father for an assignment that will take me to Jiangnan and go meet him in person."

Jing Shao agreed. Asking his brother to meet with King Huainan was best. There was the chance Gu Huaiqing might not completely place his trust in Jing Shao on his one-sided promises alone. If his brother were to go speak with him, it would be assurance from the future emperor, which naturally made Jing Chen more reliable than himself.

The two brothers kept talking until it was time for lunch. That was when Jing Shao realized that his brother hadn't gone to the Ministry of Rites today.

"The Ministry of Rites has plenty of workers. It's not as if everything has to go through me," said Jing Chen as he took a slow sip of tea. He'd known that Jing Shao would come see him today, so two days ago he'd scheduled this morning off.

By the time he sat before the dining table, Jing Shao was still amazed by the discovery that even his diligent older brother slacked off and skipped work sometimes.

Anxious to give his consort the good news that he was to be conferred a marquisate, Jing Shao bade farewell right after lunch and galloped straight to the Beiwei Estate atop Shadow.

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WATCHING HIS FATHER knock back cup after cup, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but frown. "Father, is there something troubling you?"

Mu Jin finished off the wine in his cup and glanced at his second son by his side, sighed, then poured himself some more and continued drinking.

Chapter 73:
Verbal Cues

"AH, HANZHANG, please don't resent your father. There is a difference between the legitimate born and common born, and some things must be done out of necessity for the sake of peace in the household." Marquis Beiwei's heart was troubled, so he found himself drinking a bit too much.

"Father, why would you say such a thing? How could a son possibly bear resentment toward his father?" Mu Hanzhang refilled his father's cup.

The father-son bond was one of the three fundamental bonds, and as a father was his son's guiding principle, even if his father demanded his life, he could not resent him. Not to mention that his father had already treated him quite well for a common-born son.

A common-born son could not inherit the peerage; this had been the rule since time immemorial. When the late emperor had still been alive, Earl Shouchang's legitimate-born son had died young, and as he had no legitimate-born brothers himself, he'd petitioned to have a common-born son named as his heir. The late emperor had simply stripped his family of the peerage without a second thought. Ultimately, inheritance among the nobility depended upon imperial favor. If His Majesty was displeased, even if Earl Shouchang had petitioned for the son from a secondary wife, his peerage would have been seized all the same. This was why, no matter how exceptional a son he was, Marquis Beiwei could never take such a risk.

Mu Hanzhang knew that, for his father, preserving the peerage passed down to him from their forbears was of utmost importance; only as long as the peerage existed could their clan survive. A mere common-born son like himself seemed insignificant by comparison.

Was there a parent under heaven who did not love their children?

Back when his father had taught him spear techniques, he'd already told him that there was no merit in waiting to inherit the old man's peerage.

He’d told Mu Hanzhang that he needed to have ambition—when he grew up, he could earn a peerage for himself!

With red-rimmed eyes from all the wine he’d drunk, Marquis Beiwei looked at his son and shook his head. “You’re too kindhearted for your own good.”

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together. He’d rarely seen his father so dejected. Could it be that Mu Lingbao was *gravely* ill?

He probed cautiously, “Father, why did you not attend morning court today?”

“I’m always thinking about how best to protect myself, but in the end, I still end up mired in the mud,” said Marquis Beiwei, as if talking to himself. He didn’t answer Mu Hanzhang’s question. “When you get back, tell His Highness that I had no other choice.”

Upon hearing this, Mu Hanzhang could no longer sit still; it seemed that his father had been rambling on about resentment for so long because of Jing Shao! That meant there must have been some sort of trap laid out for him at today’s morning court!

He hastily took his leave and had just stepped through the secondary gates with hanging pillars that led to the private residence when he bumped right into a man walking briskly inside. Mu Hanzhang staggered from the collision, but instead of apologizing, that man wrapped his arms around Mu Hanzhang’s waist and even sneaked in a little squeeze.

“Hey there, beautiful, where are you rushing off to in such a hurry?”

Mu Hanzhang’s handsome face flushed scarlet, and he looked up to see only Jing Shao’s ostensibly stern face. Judging by his expression, he certainly didn’t seem like he’d suffered any wrongs at court. As he let out a sigh of relief, Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the same time.

“This Prince has been to the Beiwei Estate before, so how come I’ve never seen such a striking beauty before? No, no, I must take you back to the estate with me this very day!” said Jing Shao as he swept Mu Hanzhang up into a princess carry, laughing coldly a couple of times to really sell the act. “Beautiful, don’t you roll your eyes at me. This prince will dismiss his concubine today, and swear to stay true to you ’til our hair turns white, and in the white light of day, we shall openly copula—”

Mu Hanzhang immediately covered his husband’s mouth and quickly looked around. Yun Zhu had long since grabbed the servant leading them inside to fetch the carriage.

Jing Shao stuck out his tongue and lightly licked at that soft palm. When Mu Hanzhang pulled his hand back, ticklish, Jing Shao couldn’t help but laugh aloud, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Mu Hanzhang twisted out of his hold and got back to his feet, then straightened out the wrinkles in his robes. “Why are you so happy?”

Jing Shao chuckled. “Because I’m about to marry a marquis as my rightful consort!”

Mu Hanzhang frowned, then looked sharply up at Jing Shao. Just what did he mean by marrying a marquis as his rightful consort? Did Jing Shao know that Mu Lingbao didn’t have long to live? He suddenly recalled how Jing Shao had kept talking about coming back before the Spring Festival to get something important done, but then he’d said he wouldn’t make it in time and would get someone else to do it. Could it be…? Mu Hanzhang grabbed him and started heading outside without saying another word.

Confounded, Jing Shao assumed his consort was embarrassed by his actions and wanted to take him as far away as possible, so he simply let himself be pulled along. He even deliberately dragged his feet so that it looked like Mu Hanzhang was trying to take an unwilling cat out on a walk, and it was slumped on the ground, refusing to move.

On the trip back, Yun Zhu took the carriage back on his own while His Highnesses rode back on Shadow together.

“The heir fell into the water during the third nine-day period of winter,” Mu Hanzhang said, turning back to look at Jing Shao.

“Is that so?” Jing Shao said as though he didn’t think much of it, then said nothing more.

Mu Hanzhang narrowed his eyes. “Did you already know?”

“I’ve been with you the whole time, so how would I know?” Jing Shao said with conviction, though this only made him sound more suspicious.

Mu Hanzhang sighed and averted his eyes. “You really didn’t have to take such a risk for me.”

“It’s just an eye for an…” Jing Shao began proudly but realized halfway through that he’d let something slip, and the words got stuck in his throat; he dared not say anything else.

He looked down and found his consort’s amused smile, one brow raised. Immediately, Prince Cheng turned his horse around and dashed into an alley behind the main street. Turning the man around in his arms, he claimed his lips with a violent kiss, hiding his embarrassment with rash anger.

By the time the lingering kiss finally ended, Mu Hanzhang was gasping softly for breath, and there was a hint of red at the corners of his eyes. Jing Shao leaned in to nuzzle him with tender sympathy, whispering, “Anyone who ever hurt you will pay for it tenfold. I swear it!” His voice was gentle and low, but his words were more powerful than if he’d shouted them at the top of his lungs.

Mu Hanzhang stared at him unwaveringly for a little while, one hand coming up slowly to rest on his handsome profile. “I have long since stopped resenting them.”

Realizing that Mu Hanzhang was worried that he’d taken things too far, Jing Shao turned his head to kiss the center of his palm. “Don’t worry, Mu Lingbao isn’t going to die. I made damn sure of it!”

“Then why did you say you’re going to marry a marquis as your rightful consort?” Mu Hanzhang raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Well…” Jing Shao leaned in and put his teeth over the shell of Mu Hanzhang’s ear. “I’ll tell you that later tonight.”

The two horsed around all the way home, and when they got through the door, they came upon Master Yun, who informed them that Imperial Physician Jiang was here.

Imperial Physician Jiang was Jiang Lang’s father, the one Jing Shao had brought in to treat his princely consort when they’d just gotten married. He had always been reluctant to seem too close to any particular member of the imperial family or the noble houses, so why then had he taken the initiative to call on them today?

Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang exchanged a glance. Mu Hanzhang whispered a few words in his ear, and Jing Shao nodded in understanding. The two of them then went into the main hall together.

“Doctor Jiang, how have you been?” Dispensing with formalities, Jing Shao politely asked Doctor Jiang to have a seat.

“Tomorrow is the Lantern Festival, so this one has come to deliver New Year gifts.” Doctor Jiang was clearly unused to this sort of thing; when he spoke, his words sounded a bit stiff.

Mu Hanzhang chuckled softly and took the items out of Doctor Jiang’s hands. “You’re far too kind, truly. There’s no need for such formalities between the Jiang clan and Prince Cheng’s household, is there?”

Doctor Jiang gave a mildly uncomfortable-looking smile. His Highness had said he would find a suitable position for his son, and he’d ended up securing one in Prince Cheng’s vanguard battalion. Ever since then, the Jiang clan had been unavoidably tied to Prince Cheng, and by the time he’d realized it, it was already too late.

“I actually came here today because there is something I would like to ask of Your Highness.”

To Yun Zhu, Mu Hanzhang passed the gift from Doctor Jiang followed by several quiet instructions.

Doctor Jiang informed them that Jiang Lang’s mother hadn’t been feeling well lately, and he wanted His Highness to transfer Jiang Lang back to the capital so he could attend to her more often.

“And here I was thinking it might be something dire. This is nothing,” said Jing Shao with a smile. “I will make arrangements right after the Lantern Festival. But it would be best to wait until the promotion he received from his participation in the war is finalized. It’ll be easier to set him up with a good job once his position in the army is higher.”

Doctor Jiang let out a sigh of relief. “Well, then, thank you very much, Your Highness!”

“Jiang Lang is His Highness’s right-hand man. Even if he’s transferred back to the capital, no one will dare to push him around. You can rest assured,” added Mu Hanzhang casually.

When he heard this, Doctor Jiang's newly relaxed jaw tensed up all over again. The fight to be the imperial heir had become more blatant than ever before. Despite his wish to avoid getting involved, what Princely Consort Cheng said was true as well. No matter where Jiang Lang ended up, everyone would know he started off his career as a member of Prince Cheng's personal troops. Once branded, it was hard to break free again. Thinking about it, he couldn't help but feel a little despondent.

While they spoke, Yun Zhu came in holding a box.

"Here are some rare medicinal ingredients we obtained from Xinan. We wouldn't know what to do with them even if we kept them, so you might as well take them home for your wife to help strengthen her health," said Mu Hanzhang, gesturing for Yun Zhu to hand Doctor Jiang the box.

"Um…" Doctor Jiang wanted to refuse, but the princely consort had left no room for further discussion. He had no way to say no and so felt obliged to accept.

Once Doctor Jiang had accepted the gift, Mu Hanzhang sat down beside his prince and said lightly, "There is this one trivial matter I would like to ask you about."

"Please go ahead, Your Highness." Doctor Jiang was already indebted, and since Princely Consort Cheng had referred to it as trivial, it wasn't as if he could refuse.

"Marquis Beiwei's heir summoned an imperial physician to check on him a little while ago in regard to a certain…ailment." Mu Hanzhang rubbed the edge of his teacup and asked deliberately, "I heard it's quite serious, and perhaps…" He drew out the end of his softly spoken sentence and trailed off with a faint exhale.

"Your Highness, please don't be too heartbroken over this." Doctor Jiang sighed. "But as it is the most fragile place on a body, after this bout of frostbite, I'm afraid recovery will be difficult. Even the medical director of the Academy of Medicine is at his wit's end."

Chapter 74:
The Dismissal of a Concubine

THE IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS were habitually tight-lipped but only in front of outsiders. When they treated anyone from a noble house, everything important had to be disclosed to the emperor regardless, which meant that Doctor Jiang wasn't surprised that a member of the imperial family knew of the incident, and so he simply explained everything outright.

Mu Hanzhang turned to Jing Shao in surprise, and Jing Shao gave him a look in return that said, *"I'm not entirely sure either."* Together, they asked a few more carefully worded questions. It wasn't until Mu Hanzhang heard such phrases as "it would be difficult to have more children" and "problems in the bedroom" that he finally came to the conclusion that Mu Lingbao was somehow gelded by the frostbite.

After seeing off Doctor Jiang, Jing Shao returned to find his consort sitting in the same spot. He was deep in thought, his brows furrowed and his jade-smooth fingers unconsciously rubbing the armrest of his chair.

"What are you thinking about?" The sight made Jing Shao feel as if his heart was being gently clenched, and he couldn't resist taking that restless hand into his own. "From now on, you should grab me instead when you're thinking about stuff."

He thought about how his consort might unconsciously caress him the way he did the chair, and if he were to take a hold of little Jing Shao… *Heh heh…*

Mu Hanzhang looked up at him and shook his head helplessly. "Your silly grin is showing."

Jing Shao giggled and rubbed his nose, then squeezed in next to his consort to share the same chair. But with the armrests, it was an impossible fit for two men. Mu Hanzhang got up, exasperated, only to find himself pulled down to settle pleasantly into Jing Shao's lap.

The two of them had gotten so used to sitting like this at the military camp that Mu Hanzhang only fidgeted a little before he stopped struggling.

“My mother may be pregnant.” Surprising Jing Shao, Mu Hanzhang picked up his hand to fiddle with. The hand was slender, the joints distinct, and it was wide and strong. The palm and fingertips bore light calluses formed from years of holding weapons.

“Is that so?” Jing Shao replied, utterly shocked. His mother-in-law was well over thirty, wasn’t she? Women could conceive at that age? “That’s good news. Did she consult an imperial physician?”

Mu Hanzhang shook his head. “That house is in chaos at the moment, and besides, the heir is… You really are ruthless. To think you actually gelded him.”

Mu Hanzhang’s fingers rubbing against his palm were tickling him, but Jing Shao didn’t dare say a word in case he stopped touching him, so he slowly gripped his hand in return. “You can’t blame me for that. When they found Mu Lingbao, that guy was partying at a brothel. How could the thugs be expected to remember to put his pants back on for him?”

Mu Hanzhang sighed. “I want to bring Mother to our place for the day so we can get a doctor to take a look at her.”

“Sure.” Hearing him say “our place” delighted Jing Shao. “We might as well just bring Mother over here and have her stay for her entire pregnancy. We won’t be leaving the capital for at least a year anyhow.”

“How is that in any way proper?” Mu Hanzhang gave him a look, trying not to smile. “With my father still alive, there is no justification for bringing Mother to her married son’s household to care for her.”

“Tomorrow is the Lantern Festival, so it wouldn’t make sense for us to visit, and we have to go to the palace in the evening. How about the day after, then? We’ll just ask Doctor Jiang to have a look at her.”

Mu Hanzhang frowned. He had planned to find a doctor from somewhere in the capital in order to prevent any word of it from getting out, but on second thought, if the Prince Cheng Estate were to bring in a doctor from the city for no good reason, it would surely arouse suspicion. Not to mention that whatever happened in the Prince Cheng Estate would be a matter within the imperial family, so an imperial physician would never

breathe a word about it. With all this in mind, Mu Hanzhang nodded his assent.

Jing Shao rested his chin on Mu Hanzhang's shoulder and gently rocked him left and right. For a time, the two of them fell quiet, each planning out what was to come. The afternoon sunlight streamed into the room, adding to the cozy peace of this moment together.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek shattered the tender atmosphere. "Your Highness! Your Highness! You wretched cur, move aside. I need to see His Highness!"

Mu Hanzhang got off Jing Shao's lap, stood up, and straightened his collar. Then, he turned to Jing Shao, whose expression had become solemn and grave. "Did something happen?"

Jing Shao stood up and ordered the guards to take Song Lingxin to the Zephyr Pavilion, and he, too, got up and started walking outside. "Go take a nap in the east wing," he said to his consort. "I'll join you after I've handled this."

Mu Hanzhang followed after him disapprovingly. "You should leave me to take care of matters of the harem."

"For this, I must step in," said Jing Shao with a sneer. "What do you think she's making a fuss about? Her father nearly got me killed at court today."

Together, the two of them arrived at the study in the Zephyr Pavilion. As soon as Song Lingxin saw Jing Shao, she threw herself at him, but he dodged, leaving her to collapse to the floor with a thud instead.

"Your Highness, my father had no other choice! I had nothing to do with it!" Song Lingxin decided to simply stay sprawled out on the ground, clutching at the hems of Jing Shao's robes as she wept and pleaded.

Jing Shao looked down coldly at the woman at his feet. "You had nothing to do with it? Then out of all the issues he could have raised, why did he choose to single out the princely consort?"

"How could I possibly understand court affairs? I'm just a woman!" Song Lingxin sobbed, her face streaked with tears and snot.

Mu Hanzhang's brows furrowed as he took a general guess at what this was all about. While he had no idea what might have happened at morning court, Song Lingxin seemed well-informed and had even managed to react this quickly. Keeping someone like this in the residence would cause another incident sooner or later. He glanced up at Jing Shao and found only sheer disgust written over his face.

When he'd said he needed to step in today, it must have been because he'd decided to give up on Song Lingxin and her father. Selfishly, Mu Hanzhang naturally wished Jing Shao didn't have any concubines, but if he dismissed Lady Song today, Mu Hanzhang would be Jing Shao's one remaining partner, and people would inevitably start trying to set him up with more concubines.

Yanking his sleeve out of her grip, Jing Shao turned away from her and walked to the desk, where he picked up a brush to start drawing up a writ of dismissal.

Song Lingxin stared at what he was writing, then suddenly let out a scream. "Your Highness! Your Highness, Father did that for your own good! Great accomplishments can unsettle the emperor, so Father was trying to downplay your success!"

She was being dismissed as a lowly concubine, and on top of that, her father had crossed Prince Cheng—how was she supposed to live from now on?!

"The Prince Cheng Estate does not shelter those who bite the hand that feeds them." Jing Shao looked at her coldly.

He'd never liked this woman from the moment she stepped into the estate, even in his past life; marrying her was just intended to get Song An on his side. Now, even the purpose she served was pointless. Someone as incompetent as Song An was no help at all and could only be a hindrance to Jing Shao. Earlier today he and his brother had already decided to remove Song An as soon as possible. Obviously, that meant he couldn't keep this woman around either.

"But Your Highness, I've done so much for this household! And yet for this shameless strumpet you've gone and dismissed all of the concubines!" Song Lingxin leaped to her feet and pointed her finger at Mu Hanzhang, rudely berating him. "You slut! A grown man using shameless

tricks to seduce another man! You've disgraced the very idea of being a scholar! You brazen hussy!"

Thwack! A loud, clear slap landed on Song Lingxin's face as she raved. When she turned to look, she realized that it had been the maid that served at the princely consort's side.

"You little whore, how dare you hit me!" Lady Song was close to madness, far past all consideration of the poise expected of her status. Every other word she spat was either "whore" or "slut," and she immediately raised a hand to retaliate against Ge Ruoyi.

Ge Ruoyi grabbed Lady Song's wrist and twisted it skillfully behind the concubine's back before she spoke, carefully enunciating every word. "A concubine who insults the primary wife should be slapped twenty times!"

Watching the farce before him, Mu Hanzhang shook his head. Then he told Duofu, standing at the side of the room, "Duofu, inventory all of Lady Song's dowry so she can bring it home with her, then give her a thousand taels of silver in addition."

Hearing this, Lady Song suddenly calmed down and stopped struggling and wailing. After a brief pause, she said, "Thank you, Your Highness." Ge Ruoyi released the apparently mollified Song Lingxin from her hold. Suddenly, Lady Song drew a dagger hidden at her waist and threw herself at Mu Hanzhang with a scream.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao was shocked. He was still standing behind the desk, so he instantly sprang on top of it.

Clang! A sharp, crisp metallic sound rang out as the dagger was sliced into two by the Latent Radiance. At the same time, Jing Shao arrived, kicking his unhinged former concubine clear across the room.

"Are you all right?" Jing Shao hurriedly pulled his consort over to check on him.

Mu Hanzhang nodded, returning the Latent Radiance to its scabbard.

Jing Shao turned his gaze on Song Lingxin, who lay by the door, unable to get up. A surge of murderous intent flashed in his eyes. “Duofu. Punish her as a concubine who attempted to murder the primary wife.”

Duofu glanced at the woman on the floor and scrunched up his face as he acknowledged the order. Even if she wasn’t actually able to harm him, according to the laws of the Chen empire, a concubine who conspired to kill the primary wife would be sent to prison.

Done with the situation, Jing Shao wrapped his arms around his “frightened” princely consort and withdrew to the east wing.

Mu Hanzhang didn’t resist it at all, as he was lost in thought, and allowed himself to be carried all the way back. By the time he came back to his senses, he found himself already on their big bed in the east wing and pinned beneath a certain someone.

“Why are you spacing out again? Were you scared?” Jing Shao leaned in close and pressed a kiss to his eyelid.

“Of course not!” Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help smiling, but when he stared into Jing Shao’s dark eyes, a trace of melancholy drifted across his features. “Once Lady Song is dismissed, there will be no more concubines in the estate. And you don’t have an heir yet, so if…”

“If what?” Jing Shao propped himself up on his arms and stared down at him, the look in his eyes uncertain and stormy.

“If Father insists that you must take a concubine, what will you do?” Mu Hanzhang stared at him steadily. Though he used to think there was nothing wrong with him having one or two as mere decorations, whenever he thought of Jing Shao taking in another woman, he felt a pang in his heart.

“What do you want me to do?” Jing Shao flung the question right back at him. They’d understood what was in each other’s hearts for a long time now, and if Junqing dared say anything to try to convince him to take a concubine, he’d make sure he couldn’t get out of bed for three days!

Mu Hanzhang lowered his gaze and said in a barely audible voice, “I won’t let you take a concubine…”

“What did you say?” Jing Shao got up close to his lips, the curve of his smile growing wider and wider.

“I won’t let you take a concubine.” His voice was still tiny, but it spoke with unwavering conviction. Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips, his long eyelashes trembling slightly, making him resemble a pitiful critter that was being picked on.

Watching the man beneath him, Jing Shao felt as though his heart had softened like a pool thawing in spring. Every time he thought he was already fond of him to an excessive degree, he would discover even more lovable sides to this man, so that he found himself falling a little more each day, sinking deeper and deeper until he could no longer extricate himself.

He leaned over to softly kiss those fluttering lashes and murmured softly in his ear, “Say it again, a little louder, and I’ll say yes.”

So, Jing Shao had completely heard him earlier and was simply teasing him on purpose! Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and pushed the man on top of him away before sitting up. “If you do take a concubine, then don’t ever touch me again.”

Jing Shao grabbed him and pulled him back into his arms, then rolled them both over on the bed. He laughed. “Don’t worry, Father won’t ever try to make me take another concubine.”

Mu Hanzhang frowned. “And why is that?”

“I’ll tell you if you give me one kiss!” Jing Shao flipped them around again so he landed on top, one hand wandering brazenly under Mu Hanzhang’s lapels.

Chapter 75:
Family Banquet

MU HANZHANG WAS NEVER going to fall for a trick like that. His eyes narrowed as he thought about it for a moment. “I already know even if you don’t tell me.”

“What?” Seeing the smile in Mu Hanzhang’s eyes, Jing Shao thought he looked like a mischievous cat, and his heart throbbed with desire.

“You must have told Father that you were impotent, and that you’d only disgrace yourself if you take another concubine,” murmured Mu Hanzhang by his ear.

There was a moment of dead silence. Jing Shao stared at him, stunned, then his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Do you suspect that I am?”

“It was mere conjecture—ah!” Before Mu Hanzhang managed to finish, the upper half of his robes was wrenched open without restraint, and a warm, wet mouth was suddenly pressed against his chest; after a sharp pain came indescribable pleasure that wrested a low moan from his throat.

Jing Shao released the pitiful little thing from between his teeth, grabbed the hands of the man beneath him, and trapped them up above his head. “You may see for yourself right now whether This Prince is impotent or not.”

“Knock it off; I have to go meet with Mister Zhou this afternoon, mm…” Realizing that Jing Shao was serious, Mu Hanzhang tried to wriggle away, but the man on top of him clearly had no intention of letting him go.

Ignoring the fact that his consort had already admitted that he was entirely capable, Jing Shao stubbornly insisted on proving his ability, and a perfectly good afternoon nap was utterly ruined by his antics.

“Mm…slow… Slow down…ah…” Mu Hanzhang gripped his pillow tight, the unceasing quick thrusts from the man above him making him arch his neck back until his head tipped over its edge. His long legs quivered uncontrollably, slung over Jing Shao’s hips.

Jing Shao eased the pace and leaned in closer to press a kiss to those slightly parted lips, giving Mu Hanzhang time to catch his breath. Then, slowly, he pulled nearly all the way out before abruptly driving in to the hilt.

Mu Hanzhang gripped the sheets beneath him. Every time Jing Shao repeated this motion, his body would spasm in ecstasy. It was so overwhelming, such intense sensation, that he couldn't make a single sound, and after a dozen more of these careful thrusts, Jing Shao resumed the swift assault from earlier.

Rapid one moment and slow the next, this varying pace soon brought a sheen of tears to cloud those beautiful eyes.

The man in his arms still wouldn't stop trembling. Jing Shao kissed away the single drop that had escaped his tearful eyes as he came, then gently stroked the crown of his head over and over again. The two of them soaked in the brilliant afterglow for a while before returning to reality.

Laughing, Jing Shao playfully bit his wife's beautiful collarbones. "So how about it? Have you learned your lesson?"

Mu Hanzhang glared at him irritably, not planning to respond. At times like these, no matter what he said, Jing Shao would use it as an excuse to go for another round.

A glare from those teary, red-rimmed eyes was no deterrent at all; Jing Shao smiled triumphantly and slowly withdrew his cock.

"Mm…" Mu Hanzhang's brows drew together as he exhaled. "So? What exactly happened? You can tell me now, right?"

Jing Shao lay down on his side and, smiling, pulled Mu Hanzhang into his embrace. "See, if you'd just done as I said and gave me that kiss from the start, you'd already know. And it wouldn't have taken me so much effort either." As he said this, he reached down to give Mu Hanzhang's smooth, tender ass a little pat.

Turning red, Mu Hanzhang grabbed his hand and tossed it out of the covers, then turned away to ignore him.

Jing Shao leaned in close to spoon himself up against Mu Hanzhang again. Worried that if he truly aggravated his consort, he'd have to go sleep

with Li’l Sunbeam tonight, Jing Shao behaved himself and stopped fooling around.

“All right, I’ll stop teasing.” He buried his nose in Mu Hanzhang’s nape, greedily drinking the faint fragrance of his body mixed in with the scent of sweat, and briefly explained what had happened at morning court earlier today.

Mu Hanzhang seemed stunned for a moment, then slowly said, “You’re saying he wants to grant me a marquisate?”

“Yeah. The Ministry of Rites hasn’t decided on the title yet. I asked Brother to pick one that suits you, but it’ll definitely sound more impressive than Marquis Beiwei!” said Jing Shao proudly.

Being made a marquis meant that he would have the right to join the imperial court at assembly, and that his brilliance had been acknowledged. Most importantly, it meant that once his father was gone, he had the right to bring his mother into the estate as a dowager marquise… Once he’d married Prince Cheng, he had no longer been able to participate in the Civil Service Examination, so he’d thought that this was all the rest of his life could be, and that if the history books should ever mention him, it would only be as a title attached to someone else as “Princely Consort Cheng.” He’d never imagined that his fate could change so dramatically!

Even though Mu Hanzhang himself was no longer obsessed with taking the imperial exams after he and Jing Shao had confessed their affections for one another, what man wouldn’t want to achieve greatness, build a legacy, and leave his name in history?

Jing Shao went on and on before he realized that the man in his arms hadn’t said anything in a while, and so he leaned over his shoulder to look, only to find his consort with half his face buried in the pillow, smiling a covert smile.

Seeing Junqing like this, Jing Shao couldn’t help smiling along with him, but internally, he felt an ache gradually wrap itself around his heart. His Junqing had always had the talent to be granted a title and to serve as the prime minister, yet his wings had been clipped again and again. He had intended to pester him to sleep with him one more time, but as the ache overwhelmed his heart, the heat in his loins subsided.

Jing Shao held him a little closer and said, “Once they decide on the title, I’ll get someone to change out the plaque above the gates to read ‘Prince Cheng and Marquis something something Estate.’”

“Mm-hmm,” responded Mu Hanzhang hazily.

“Oh yeah, we’ll tear down the west wing and turn it into a scenic garden. That way Li’l Sunbeam will have a place to hunt.” Jing Shao held Mu Hanzhang’s hand and made his calculations using those lustrous fingers rather than his own.

Mu Hanzhang raised an eyebrow. Shouldn’t they turn it into the marquis’s private courtyard house? At the very least, shouldn’t it be turned into a series of guest rooms? Why would he turn it into a garden? But Jing Shao seemed to be having fun talking about it, so Mu Hanzhang chose not to point this out.

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IT WAS THE 15TH of the First Month, the day of the Lantern Festival.

There was no morning court today. Jing Shao slept in with his consort until the sun was high in the sky, and he was awoken by Li’l Sunbeam, who sneaked into the room and pounced on him.

“Raaow!” Li’l Sunbeam lay sprawled over the edge of the bed, his head tilted to one side as he watched the two resting for a while. Then he crouched low and—sprang!

Once he’d leaped onto the spacious bed, the little tiger leaned close to Mu Hanzhang’s cheek and rubbed his head against it. Then he climbed onto Jing Shao and settled onto his chest.

“I can’t even get a moment’s peace with you around.” Jing Shao sat up and pushed the tiger off him. “Brother might be going to Jiangnan next month. I’ll have to have him take this guy to the Wading Gardens for Gu Huaiqing to raise along with his lion.”

Mu Hanzhang sat up as well. He squeezed the little tiger’s round ear, and Li’l Sunbeam shook his head before lying down on his back and softly

calling out to him.

“But if Li’l Sunbeam is away from us for too long, he won’t recognise me anymore.” Having gotten used to the cub by his side over the past six months, he really couldn’t bear to part with him and give him to King Huainan.

At his consort’s reluctance, Jing Shao gave in at once and immediately changed his tune. “I wasn’t really serious.”

The two got ready for the day, and because there was a palace banquet in the evening, they took advantage of having free time until then to visit The Flavor of Nostalgia.

“Something came up yesterday,” said Jing Shao, explaining why they weren’t able to meet with him the day before. “Vice Minister Xiao didn’t come help out? Even though there’s no morning court today?”

With the lantern festival celebrations taking place in the capital today, business at the restaurant was sure to be booming. Right now, the lunchtime customers hadn’t yet begun to arrive, and Zhou Jin, in a strikingly pink outfit, was sitting in the main hall making sweet rice dumplings in a large dough bowl.

“It’s rare for him to have a rest day, so I’m letting him sleep in at home.” Zhou Jin smiled and asked the waiter to bring them each a bowl of sweet rice dumplings.

“I heard that Earl Yongchang broke a set of teacups when he got home yesterday. Countess Yongchang said that she’s going to take it up with the empress,” said Zhou Jin, laughing as he relayed the gossip he’d heard yesterday.

Mu Hanzhang swallowed a dumpling. “Surely she can’t enter the palace today. There’s going to be a banquet tonight.”

“Hah,” scoffed Zhou Jin. “Earl Yongchang’s wife is famously relentless. Since His Highness struck the earl, she’s probably going to be talking about how badly he was treated for the next six months.” He shook his head. If she couldn’t enter the palace today, then she’d surely go tomorrow—and every day thereafter.

Jing Shao wasn’t concerned. How much trouble could one woman stir up?

Mu Hanzhang, however, kept this in the back of his mind, even though he didn’t say anything. He gave Zhou Jin a pair of jade pixiu he’d brought from Dongnan, with the wish that his business would be prosperous. Both pixiu had a rather beautiful color that was deep and lustrous and were the size of chicken eggs, so they were perfect to be worn as belt pendants.

Zhou Jin readily accepted them and gave a gift in return: a full jar of salted duck eggs.

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THE EVENING BANQUET on the 15th of the First Month was a family banquet, and nowhere near as grand as the one hosted on the first day of the year. Only immediate relatives within two generations were permitted to attend.

The empress sat in her high seat of honor, looking regal in her vibrant phoenix robes, watching the married couple coldly as they entered hand in hand. Although normally womenfolk would sit on the right, since Mu Hanzhang was a man, he sat with Jing Shao at the second table on the left, while the first table was already occupied by Prince Rui, Jing Chen.

With three splendidly dressed men sitting together, that corner suddenly felt lively. Even though the trio spoke fleetingly to one another, they still appeared as if they had numbers and power on their side. In contrast, Fourth Prince Jing Yu sat all alone at the third table with his head silently down, making him appear isolated and at a disadvantage.

Slowly, the empress consort's willow-leaf-shaped brows knitted together. She had intended to make Prince Cheng marry a man to turn the brothers against each other, but not only did Jing Shao bear no resentment toward his elder brother, he also greatly cherished his rightful consort. And now, that same consort was even going to be made a marquis—she'd somehow ended up giving Jing Chen two more allies!

Emperor Hongzheng had been drinking in his own high seat since the beginning of the banquet, and as he took in every change in the empress's demeanor, he couldn't help but sneer inwardly. She'd been the empress for this long, yet she still behaved so unpleasantly. He thought back to the old days, when the dignified and virtuous late empress used to personally cook a whole pot of sweet rice dumplings for this banquet every year, and she would have all of the brothers sit at the same table while she dished out bowls of dumplings one by one.

Jing Shao was always the cheekiest one and would ask for more whenever he finished his bowl, but the late empress never prepared extra for him, so Jing Chen would push his own bowl over to his little brother. Now, looking again at the icy palace banquet they were having today, Emperor Hongzheng suddenly thought how lonely this was and couldn't help but sigh.

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AS WAS THE RULE, on the evening of the 15th, the emperor had to stay in the empress's palace. Emperor Hongzheng had had a couple of cups too many, and when he entered the Rite of Luan Palace, all he wanted was to bathe and sleep.

The empress consort personally waited on Emperor Hongzheng as he changed his clothes. After endlessly revolving the matter in her mind, she found she had no other choice but to speak up.

"Your Majesty, though this one knows that she should hold her tongue when it comes to court affairs, Jing Shao still doesn't have any children. If Princely Consort Cheng gains a marquisate, Jing Shao won't be able to take any more concubines. What will happen if he ends up childless?"

Emperor Hongzheng didn't even need to look to know what expression the empress had on her face. As she reached to continue undressing him, he blocked her hand with its long fingernails and undid the coiled dragon clasp by his neck on his own.

"Jing Shao doesn't like women, so even if you fill his estate with concubines, it won't do him any good." There used to be no shortage of concubines in the Prince Cheng Estate, but none of them ever gave him children.

"He was still young back then. I mean, just look at Jing Yu; he's been married for six months already and we haven't heard a thing yet, right?" The empress consort chose her next words carefully. "Besides, no princely

consort has ever been bestowed a title during our dynasty, and if he wants to attend morning court, then wouldn't that—"

"Enough!" Emperor Hongzheng felt like a fly was buzzing around in his brain, and he cut her off impatiently. "Do you really think that We can't tell what you're implying? We have our own opinions on matters of the court. We do not need you to tell us what to do."

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty!" The empress consort hastened to bow. "This one—"

"You just can't stand to see Princely Consort Cheng being granted a title, can you?" Emperor Hongzheng threw the inner robe he'd just taken off in the empress consort's face. "If it wasn't for that meddling son of yours sticking his nose where it didn't belong, do you think things would have escalated to the point where Princely Consort Cheng had to receive this honor?!"

Chapter 76:
Women

"YOUR— YOUR MAJESTY…" Utterly baffled, the empress consort was so stunned she wasn't sure what she should say.

Was it true? Had she misread His Majesty's intentions? Then why had he sighed over Jing Shao's report of victory before? Fortunately, she retained some sense and knew that this was a question she absolutely must not ask.

Emperor Hongzheng cast a look toward her. The case of the embezzlement of military funds by the Ministry of Revenue implicated many people, and even though it had ultimately been dropped and the leads not pursued further, all of the evidence pointed to the fourth prince. Ever since he'd punished those officials, the empress and Jing Yu had seemed far more impatient and anxious than before. Whenever she used to bring up Jing Shao, she had been full of praise or admonition, but now her slander was becoming increasingly brazen.

The empress consort collected herself, stole a glance at the look on the emperor's face, and felt her heart sinking despite herself. She immediately changed her tune.

"This one was thoughtless," she said, getting down on her knees to bow to him formally.

Emperor Hongzheng ignored her and sat down on the bed.

The empress consort immediately got up to follow him. The palace attendants had withdrawn as soon as the two began to argue, so she crouched down and took off his shoes for him herself.

She began to choke up as she said, "As a mere woman, I think of nothing else each day except for Your Majesty and our descendants. Jing Yu is still young and doesn't have any children yet, so I can only hope for his three elder brothers to help the imperial family flourish. I never thought that it would affect the imperial court."

Emperor Hongzheng said nothing. It was unclear whether he was listening at all.

“That muddleheaded brother of mine must have heard from someone that Princely Consort Cheng had offended me, and he didn’t know that he had been specially permitted to leave with the army by Your Majesty. That was the only reason he said such a thing. Your Majesty, please don’t waste your time on him.” She took out a handkerchief and began to sob.

“You may rise.” There was no change in Emperor Hongzheng’s voice, and it betrayed no emotion. “Let this be the end of it. From now on, offer fewer reckless suggestions to Jing Yu.” She was an empress, after all; he had to help her maintain some semblance of dignity.

The empress consort immediately agreed, her voice quiet. By the time she rose, she was already covered in a cold sweat.

***

THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao waited until it was after High Noon before he personally took the carriage to the Beiwei Estate to bring back Lady Qiu.

“Junqing had too much to drink last night and woke up with a sore throat this morning. But he refused to take medicine and said he wanted to have the pear syrup made by his mother,” said Jing Shao with a resigned expression but an indulgent tone. “He’s not feeling well, so This Prince took the liberty of coming here to invite Madam Qiu over.”

If they wanted the pear syrup to be effective, Mu Hanzhang would have to drink it while it was hot. Making it here and sending it along would have rendered it useless. Moreover, Lady Qiu was now a secondary wife, which meant she was allowed to leave the house on occasion.

Marquis Beiwei naturally wasn’t about to stop him; rather, his assessment of just how favored Mu Hanzhang was had risen yet another level.

Following the speech that his consort had laid out, Jing Shao successfully brought Madam Qiu to the carriage. This was actually the first time Lady Qiu had met Jing Shao. Due to various rumors, she had presumed he was a crude and burly man and had never expected him to be so handsome and refined.

“Greetings, Your Highness!” Lady Qiu stepped forward to pay her respects, but before she could kneel, Jing Shao extended a hand and helped her up.

The carriage was surrounded by servants from the Beiwei Estate, so Jing Shao couldn’t say too much. He simply smiled and said, “There’s no need for such formalities among family. Madam Qiu, please board the carriage.”

Marquis Beiwei gazed at the departing carriage, his eyes dark and inscrutable. The fourth prince had threatened him with the news of Mu Lingbao having been gelded to try to get him to join their faction. But his son had already married Prince Cheng, so how could the fourth prince and his people ever truly trust him? All they wanted was for him to do their dirty work. Left without any other option, he could only feign illness and stay home. Now, word of Princely Consort Cheng being granted a marquisate had already spread throughout the entire capital, the fourth prince’s faction walked away empty-handed, and all the while, Prince Cheng’s favor toward Mu Hanzhang had not diminished in the slightest.

The power struggle over succession was about to be brought out into the open. Mu Jin’s desire to remain uninvolved was nothing but wishful thinking. His legitimate heir had been neutered, and his grandson was still too young. If the House of Beiwei was to be preserved, he had to rely on his second son.

Mu Jin heaved a sigh. From now on, his position would have to be firm and clear.

***

“HANZHANG, I HEARD you’re not feeling well?” As soon as Lady Qiu got off the carriage, she saw her son standing in front of the gates and couldn’t help but frown, immediately urging him to get back inside.

“Mom, I’m fine. I just wanted you to come get a checkup,” said Mu Hanzhang, helplessly smiling as he helped his mother inside.

“Me?” Lady Qiu frowned and turned to Prince Cheng.

“Mother, don’t worry. His Highness has already arranged everything.” Mu Hanzhang knew what she was worried about and immediately said this to comfort her.

“That’s right, Mother,” Jing Shao echoed in agreement.

Lady Qiu stared at him in shock.

Mu Hanzhang was a mirror of her reaction.

Jing Shao was an imperial prince. Never mind the fact that she was a secondary wife; even if she was Marquise Beiwei herself, she couldn’t possibly be worthy of him calling her *Mother*.

“Your Highness, you can’t say that!” Lady Qiu immediately tried to bow down to him but was overcome by a bout of vertigo.

“Mother!” Though taken by surprise, Mu Hanzhang still immediately caught his mother before she collapsed.

“Give her to me.” Jing Shao picked up his mother-in-law and quickly carried her into the house, placing her on the bed. He then turned around and left the room to get someone to send for Imperial Physician Jiang.

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DOCTOR JIANG TOOK HER PULSE with a screen between them, then considered for a moment before saying, “Madam is less than three months pregnant, and as she is older, any agitation may cause dizziness. It would be best for her to get a lot of quiet rest.”

Ever since the prince had personally fetched her, Lady Qiu had been quite nervous. Even though whenever her son visited, he told her that His Highness was very good to him, she had never been able to entirely believe him. She was still haunted by the conversation she'd heard between Marquise Beiwei and their house's heir, so she was more afraid of causing trouble for her son than anything else.

Jing Shao took the prescription Doctor Jiang had written for nurturing a fetus and soothing a mother and asked Yun Song to go get it filled. He then emphasized to Doctor Jiang that he must not mention this to anyone before heading back to his consort.

"That's just the way he is. Always speaking and acting on impulse." Mu Hanzhang's gentle, melodious voice drifted out from the room. Jing Shao stopped walking, wanting to eavesdrop on what his consort would say about him.

"Calling you 'Mother' just means he really respects you. Don't overthink it."

"But he's a member of the imperial family! Even if he's in his own estate, he should be more careful about what he says."

Jing Shao smiled. These words sounded really familiar; Junqing often scolded him just like this.

"Have you forgotten what Mother used to tell you? No matter how well His Highness treats you, you mustn't grow too proud from his favor—and decorum must not be neglected!" Lady Qiu advised, clearly still worried, and she went on to express her concerns.

The two men were both still so young, and they hadn't even been married for a year, so of course the prince still had endless affection for Mu Hanzhang. But no flower could bloom for a hundred days, and as soon as that favor was lost, all of his past mistakes would be brought up all over again.

Jing Shao couldn't listen to this anymore. He stepped inside and pulled his consort into his arms, right in front of his mother-in-law.

"Mother, please rest assured. I, Jing Shao, will never take a concubine for the rest of my life! He is the only one for me! And you're Junqing's mother, so of course you're worthy of being called that by me!"

Each word rang with conviction; Lady Qiu stared blankly at Jing Shao, never having expected that he would so brazenly say such things.

Mu Hanzhang immediately broke free of his embrace, his ears a little flushed. Being so affectionate in front of his mother was incredibly embarrassing, yet he didn't go so far as shaking off the hand holding his.

Lady Qiu stared at them for a long time, and slowly, a smile spread across her face. The gentle softness unique to Jiangnan women was present in her smile, like a delicate apricot blossom in bloom, making her truly charming. Yet, in those beautiful eyes so like Mu Hanzhang's, there was the glimmer of tears.

***

AFTER SULKING AT HOME for two days, Countess Yongchang finally couldn't stop herself from going to the palace. As soon as she saw the empress, she started to wail and complain.

"Your Majesty, my lord is at the very least the emperor's brother-in-law. But His Highness is always making him rush to the front line, and if His Majesty ever decides to assign blame, it could destroy the entire House of Yongchang!"

The empress consort had passed the night in a state of dread, and she was already looking quite unwell. All this sobbing just gave her a splitting headache.

"Jing Yu is just trying to make sure his uncle has the chance to contribute first. It's impossible to predict what might happen at court. How can he achieve great things if he's always so timid?" the empress asked.

This explanation only made Countess Yongchang angrier, but the woman in front of her wasn't just her sister-in-law, she was also the empress, so she had to keep her aggravation to herself and keep tearfully complaining. "His Highness clearly already knew His Majesty agreed to let Princely Consort Cheng travel with the army, so why did he make his uncle take such a risk?"

“It’s already in the past. What good does it do to come crying to me now?” Feeling even more irritable, the empress slammed her teacup onto the table.

“Your Majesty.” Countess Yongchang flinched, her eyes darting around quickly as her mind whirred. She clutched her handkerchief. “Prince Cheng punched my lord. He has this huge black eye, and the swelling won’t go down no matter what we put on it. He’s Your Majesty’s younger brother! Isn’t hitting him the same as slapping Your Majesty in the face?”

Halfway through her rambling she started to cry again, going on and on about how Earl Yongchang had to go to morning court today with a black eye. And Earl Yongchang was still someone of the older generation, right? Yet Prince Cheng didn’t even say anything remotely resembling an apology, and His Majesty had acted like he hadn’t even seen the assault. Earl Yongchang’s peerage was already low to begin with, and if he kept being treated like this, who among the noble houses would respect the House of Yongchang? Even the fourth prince would be looked down upon by relation.

Her words filled the empress with fury as well, but His Majesty was already displeased with Jing Yu, not to mention that she was still shaken from what had taken place the night before. She felt it best to keep a low profile for a while.

But she was unable to calm her rage, so after staying silent for a moment, she suddenly snapped, “What’s the use of crying to me?! If you’ve got the guts, go whine to the empress dowager! Go to the Hall of Ancestral Worship and cry in front of the ancestors of the Chen Empire!”

Countess Yongchang stopped in her tracks. “Your Majesty, you mean…”

“We are busy enough managing the harem. We have no time for this!” The empress raised her willow-leaf brows and waved to signal the attendant to see her guest out.

The empress dowager was Countess Yongchang’s maternal grandaunt but was neither the consort of the former emperor nor His Majesty’s mother. She was only empress dowager because Emperor Hongzheng had needed one when he ascended to the throne, and he’d chosen her out of the former emperor’s surviving concubines for being relatively highborn among them.

Due to these circumstances, the empress dowager never involved herself in court politics, but her status remained, so if Countess Yongchang were to go and weep at her, word of it would surely reach His Majesty's ears. If it didn't work the first time, she'd simply go every day; after all, His Majesty needed to maintain appearances, surely?

With this new plan, Countess Yongchang made up her mind and went straight to the empress dowager's palace hall.

The empress sat quietly for a little while, then raised her hand and threw her teacup to the floor. The worse part was that most of the connections Jing Yu had built up in the Ministry of Revenue had been ruined by the embezzlement case, and years of preparation had been destroyed overnight—how could she possibly stay calm? But the current situation demanded she keep her composure!

The gloomy atmosphere in the Rite of Luan Palace contrasted with that in the Prince Cheng Estate, where things were harmonious and joyful.

"If it's a boy, I guarantee that he'll inherit the Marquis Beiwei peerage." Jing Shao smiled as he handed over the decoction for stabilizing the pregnancy to his consort.

Mu Hanzhang took the medicine, blew on it, and tested the temperature before passing it to his mother.

Lady Qiu shook her head. "I do not require any peerage. I only wish for this child to be born safely."

The couple exchanged a look. With Mu Lingbao in such a state, if Marquise Beiwei found out Lady Qiu was pregnant, there was no telling what kind of crazy things she might do.

Mu Hanzhang frowned. "When I bring Mother back, I will go speak with Father."

Chapter 77:
Forfeit

LADY QIU RESTED in the Prince Cheng Estate until evening. Out of all the gifts granted to him since his return to the capital, Jing Shao picked out everything that womenfolk could use and gave them all to his mother-in-law to bring back to the Beiwei Estate with her.

“Your Highness, these items exceed my rank, and I cannot use them.”

Lady Qiu looked at the golden phoenix hairpins in the tray and sighed. Only consorts of second rank and above could wear hairpins like that, and she was a secondary wife, which only put her at third rank.

“If you can’t use them, then you can keep them as decoration—or you can give them away,” Jing Shao said with a shrug. “There are no womenfolk here in the estate, so keeping them here would just be a waste.”

In reality, even if she did wear them, nobody would dare say anything. After all, they had been bestowed by the imperial couple, so Prince Cheng was free to give them to whomever he wanted.

Lady Qiu boarded the carriage with a beaming smile. Mu Hanzhang turned back to Jing Shao, saying, “I’m going to talk to my father; you go ahead and have dinner on your own.”

Jing Shao tucked a lock of Mu Hanzhang’s hair, which had somehow made it in front of his robes, behind him. He protested. “I’ll go too.”

Mu Hanzhang let out a chuckle. “With you there, it will be difficult to tell Father without going around in circles.” It was, after all, a family scandal; if he aired out their dirty laundry in front of the prince, Marquis Beiwei might end up furious over the humiliation.

“All right, then.” Jing Shao helped his consort into the carriage. “I’m going to go scrounge up dinner at my brother’s place, then come pick you up afterward.”

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ACCORDING TO ETIQUETTE, Jing Shao shouldn't be having dinner in someone else's home, so even though Jing Chen was rather happy his little brother had come over for dinner, he still had to scold him for appearances' sake.

"Running around at night the way you do—what a disgrace."

"My wife's gone home to see his parents, so no one's taking care of me." Jing Shao sat down at the dinner table, perfectly justified.

Resigned, Jing Chen asked the servants to bring another bowl and a set of chopsticks.

Princely Consort Rui was still in postpartum confinement, and serving concubines were never allowed at the dining table, so Jing Chen was going to eat alone anyway; having his younger brother take dinner with him would make things much livelier.

Jing Chen sent for a jug of wine and shared a few drinks with his younger brother. "Countess Yongchang went to the Palace of Perpetual Peace today."

"Palace of Perpetual Peace?" Jing Shao took a bite out of a chicken leg and looked up in confusion. "The empress dowager doesn't even involve herself with court politics. What is Countess Yongchang going there for?"

"She was crying and making a scene, telling the empress dowager that Prince Cheng punched Earl Yongchang, and indirectly implying that the Jing family mistreated the descendants of its loyal subjects." Jing Chen slowly sipped his wine.

"Leave her to it. Once word of this gets back to Father, Earl Yongchang will suffer the consequences," said Jing Shao with a sneer.

Had the empress consort's allies all been kicked in the head by a donkey? Lately, everything they did was stupid.

"Of course she wouldn't say so outright." Jing Chen shook his head.

Although the empress dowager wasn't in charge of anything, her status was unquestionable. Countess Yongchang going there to make a

scene meant that word of her antics would quickly spread throughout the capital. She'd kept bringing up how the late Earl Yongchang had helped the founding emperor conquer the world only to receive a low-rank peerage of earl, and now, after Prince Cheng had gone and punched someone so loyal to the emperor, he was still going to make his princely consort a marquis. How could such things be right and proper in the world?!—and so on and so forth.

"Hmph, ultimately they just can't stand that Junqing will be made marquis," Jing Shao said angrily. Thinking of the faint smile that had surfaced on Junqing's face yesterday, he was set on seizing this peerage for his consort no matter what.

Countess Yongchang was lodging at the palace tonight, so she'd likely continue to make a scene tomorrow. If this went on and the empress dowager tried to intervene, the matter of his investiture might be delayed. After all, the empress dowager did have a high status, and His Majesty might not really want to grant Princely Consort Cheng this marquisate in the first place.

Jing Chen set down his cup and thought about this for a moment. "I have an idea."

The two brothers put their heads together and discussed the topic for a while. Then, when Jing Shao put down his rice bowl and was about to leave, Jing Chen grabbed him by the sleeve.

"What's the rush? Come with me and let's go meet your nephew."

Jing Shao had no idea why he had to wait and ended up getting another lecture from his brother. Jing Chen explained that the party appearing most anxious would end up in a less favorable negotiating position, so he must behave in a certain way in order to make sure the plan went well. Deferring to his brother's wisdom, Jing Shao obediently followed his brother to see his nephew.

In the cozy little room, there were two small cradles. Jing Shao went over to look, and to his surprise, there were two babies. Jing Shao turned to give his brother a confused look, and Jing Chen explained that the slightly older one was born to a princely concubine and was a fortnight older than this legitimate second son.

“If that’s the case, you have four sons now?” Jing Shao was beyond surprised and looked at the two babies carefully.

The legitimate-born baby was still small, all wrinkled and red, and rather ugly. His breathing was also weak, and he didn’t seem healthy. Meanwhile, the one from Jing Chen’s princely concubine was a little bigger, and the redness typical of newborns had faded to reveal fine features, with fair and soft skin that made him rather endearing.

Only once he’d met the children and chatted with his brother a little while longer did Jing Shao get on Shadow, heading for the Beiwei Estate.

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“I WON’T EVER DO any of those foolish things again. When you get back, tell His Highness that the horses from the northwest are all ready to go and they will be gradually sent to the capital.” Marquis Beiwei sighed.

Jing Shao had told him to get in the horse-trading business, but just like reselling salt permits, running such an operation was a capital offense if ever discovered. He’d done so rather carefully for more than six months, and it had finally started to yield results.

Mu Hanzhang averted his eyes. Jing Shao had indeed mentioned that he’d asked Marquis Beiwei to send him some horses in secret, but his father had kept making excuses. Saying this now meant that his father was planning to fully side with Jing Shao and Jing Chen.

He refilled his father’s cup with tea. “There is one more thing I would like to discuss with you, Father.”

“Go ahead.” Marquis Beiwei picked up his teacup, finding Mu Hanzhang’s gesture to be incredibly thoughtful. Mu Lingbao had never once refilled his father’s cup with tea.

“Regarding my brother’s health,” Mu Hanzhang started, then paused, pretended that he hadn’t noticed his father’s hand clench tightly around his teacup, and continued, “What do you plan to do?”

Mu Jin’s brows drew together. Surely, Mu Hanzhang had to know something of the truth to phrase it as he had. Mu Jin couldn’t help but sigh. “He brought this on himself. What can I do?”

“His Majesty already knows.” Mu Hanzhang wasn’t going to let Marquis Beiwei evade the subject, so he decided to simply lay it all out. “How do you plan to keep the Marquis Beiwei peerage?”

There was no way the imperial family would let him have a gelded man as his heir. If word of it ever got out, they would either have to depose the heir or lose the peerage.

Mu Jin sucked in a breath. “What do you think?”

His sharp eyes locked unwaveringly upon Mu Hanzhang. This matter had already been used by the fourth prince to threaten him; was Prince Cheng going to do it as well?

Mu Hanzhang set down his cup and quietly met his father’s gaze. “Both of Third Uncle’s sons also suffered injuries from frostbite, and Mother made sure everyone knew, so you no longer have the option to make Third Uncle inherit the peerage.”

Mu Jin’s third brother was his only legitimate-born brother; the rest were common-born and had no right to inherit the peerage. Marquise Beiwei had made a point of spreading information on Mu Huafeng and his brother’s injuries precisely because she wished to prevent the peerage from falling into his sibling’s hands.

Marquis Beiwei clenched his fists. That woman really seemed intent on causing havoc.

The look in Mu Jin’s eyes softened a little; his second son had brought this up in order to offer him advice, so he unintentionally began to relax, losing most of his suspicion. “Then what do you suggest we do?”

“Make your grandson your heir,” Mu Hanzhang asserted.

Mu Lingbao’s eldest legitimate son was already three years old, and in another two years, he would be six by the spring reckoning and they could submit a request to establish him as heir by imperial decree.

A furrow appeared between Mu Jin’s brows. “I already thought about doing that, but Lingbao is still alive, so how will we explain it?”

The heir was in the prime of his life, so if he requested to skip over him in succession for the heir's son instead, people would want an explanation. When that happened, Mu Lingbao's disability would be exposed, and the end result would be the same.

"That's something you don't have to worry about. Your son will help you make it happen." Mu Hanzhang's voice was as gentle as ever, but his tone was even, each of his words clear and spoken with absolute confidence. It was a very convincing voice.

Mu Jin nodded. "Did Prince Cheng say what he'd want in return?"

At present, he very much believed in the words of his second son. After all, Mu Hanzhang was about to be granted a marquisate of his own and would not need to covet his family's.

Averting his eyes, Mu Hanzhang spoke as quietly as he could. "My mother is pregnant."

"What?" Mu Jin sprang to his feet. "When did this happen?"

"I ask for nothing else, only for Father to keep her and her child safe." Mu Hanzhang stood up as well, looking Marquis Beiwei in the eye. "It is also what His Highness wants."

Marquis Beiwei looked at him steadily, apparently stunned. "Don't you want your younger brother to inherit the Marquis Beiwei peerage?"

Mu Hanzhang shook his head and smiled derisively. "We don't even know if it's a boy or a girl yet. All I ask is for them to be allowed to grow up safely. I can hope for nothing more."

When he heard this, Mu Jin thought of all of his concubines who'd miscarried and of Mu Hanzhang, who'd very nearly died young, and he almost couldn't keep his composure. He sat down dejectedly.

"It's all because I'm incompetent as a father—that she-devil!" There were things he'd never noticed in the past, but thinking back, if Marquise Beiwei hadn't been involved somehow, then why did his common-born sons and daughters rarely make it to birth? Even Mu Hanzhang, the only survivor, almost hadn't made it.

Before long, Jing Shao rode in on horseback to take his consort back home.

“Don’t worry. Even if just for the sake of the Beiwei Estate, I will make sure that this is done,” Mu Jin assured his son as he personally saw him off.

Mu Hanzhang nodded, placed his hand in Jing Shao’s, and let Jing Shao pull him up onto the horse.

The prince wrapped his arms around his consort and made sure he was properly seated, then smiled and said to Mu Jin, “Guess what I heard today. Earl Yongchang’s wife ran to the Palace of Perpetual Peace to complain, making a fuss about stopping Junqing from becoming a marquis.”

Mu Jin tensed up immediately. “Truly?”

“Quite so. She said my consort’s contributions can’t be compared to the ancestors of Earl Yongchang,” scoffed Jing Shao. “Junqing’s ancestors, of course, contributed far more to the empire than Earl Yongchang’s, so in terms of family background, there’s no way you can lose to him. Honorable Father-in-Law, wouldn’t you agree?”

Marquis Beiwei’s expression darkened, and he forced a laugh. “Well, naturally.”

If this matter got out of hand, His Majesty might just go along with it and refuse to grant Junqing his title. Instead, he would likely hand over the Marquis Beiwei peerage to Mu Hanzhang, which would be a disaster. Mu Hanzhang would not have any descendants, so the Marquis Beiwei peerage could no longer be inherited. That would spell the end of their clan.

Having said his piece, Jing Shao bade farewell to Marquis Beiwei with a smile and rode away with his consort.

Marquis Beiwei, filled with rage, went straight to Marquise Beiwei’s courtyard house.

“Absolutely not!” Marquise Beiwei screamed. “Even if Lingbao’s body is ruined, I still have a legitimate eldest grandson. No matter what, it will never be that married son’s turn to inherit the peerage!”

She’d been so stressed recently that it looked like she’d aged ten years. When she shouted at the top of her lungs like this, she even looked a little frightening.

“As long as His Majesty can successfully confer him a marquisate, the title of Marquis of Beiwei will not fall into anyone else’s hands,” said Marquis Beiwei, holding back his anger.

The idea of this made Marquise Beiwei scream even louder. “Him? He still dreams of getting a peerage?!”

Marrying an imperial prince had already elevated that spawn of a base-born concubine, and now he wanted to be a marquis?! She’d fought tooth and nail to make sure her son secured his position as heir, so why should Mu Hanzhang get the same ranking as her son or even take away the peerage her son had?!

Marquise Beiwei paced a few anxious circles, then abruptly said, “Your Lordship, we cannot let this thing proceed. His Majesty is trying to diminish our clan’s peerage! We just have to make sure Prince Cheng divorces Hanzhang so he won’t be a part of the imperial family anymore, and then—”

Whack! Marquis Beiwei finally couldn’t take it anymore and sent her toppling to the ground with one slap.

“You haven’t heard a single word I said! You rotten hag, even your heart’s been stained black with ink!”

Marquise Beiwei sprang to her feet, wailing, “Your Lordship…I only want to protect the House of Beiwei!”

“Shut your mouth!” Marquis Beiwei roared. “What exactly makes you think you can save the House of Beiwei? That gelded son of yours? Or that grandson who can’t even string a sentence together yet?”

Scolded by her husband, Marquise Beiwei stood there in shocked silence before finally covering her face with her hands and beginning to weep.

“You listen to me and listen carefully: Our family is inextricably on the same team as Prince Cheng now,” said Marquis Beiwei, staring straight into Marquise Beiwei’s eyes. “As long as Hanzhang is successfully granted his marquisate, Prince Cheng can guarantee that our grandson can be made the grand heir. His Majesty won’t say a thing about it.”

At the words “grand heir,” Marquise Beiwei immediately stopped crying.

“There’s just one thing. You’ll need to deal with Countess Yongchang,” said Mu Jin in a low voice.

Chapter 78:
Fight Fire with Fire

ONCE MARQUIS BEIWEI FELT he had made himself clear, he left the room with a dramatic swish of his sleeves, heading toward Madam Qiu's courtyard house. He hadn't yet checked on her since finding out she was pregnant. He'd been blessed with a child in his old age, and if they could be born safely, he'd be able to show off in front of Marquis Dingnan and his ilk. With this in mind, Mu Jin found his previously dark mood suddenly lifted.

Marquise Beiwei sat alone in her house all night, thinking everything through from start to finish.

Firstly, Mu Hanzhang was highly favored by Prince Cheng and had gained military distinction. His Majesty, whose words were as good as gold, had already promised to make him a marquis.

Secondly, if Mu Hanzhang were granted a marquisate, then he would not be in line to inherit the Marquis Beiwei peerage even if Mu Lingbao was dead.

However, with Countess Yongchang making such a fuss, if His Majesty decided not to create a new title to grant to Mu Hanzhang and used the news of the Marquis Beiwei heir being gelded as a pretext to make Mu Hanzhang the heir to the Marquis Beiwei peerage, then she would lose everything.

Therefore, their top priority was to make sure Mu Hanzhang was made a marquis. That way he wouldn't come for her grandson's marquisate. She couldn't believe how lucky that lowborn brat had gotten!

With her mind made up, Marquise Beiwei lay down to rest for four hours. The next day, she got ready at dawn, then handed in her name plaque and entered the palace.

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THAT MORNING'S COURT SESSION was somewhat drawn out because His Majesty wanted to summon the first prince back to the capital to prevent his continued embarrassment in front of the Southern Barbarians. Naturally, the officials allied with Jing Yu agreed with this decision—with Prince Cheng having already returned, rather than leaving the first prince idling away in Yunnan-Tibet and making a thankless effort without gaining any military power, they might as well have him hurry back so that the fourth prince could have another ally.

"Yunnan-Tibet's terrain can be challenging, and as the first prince has never led troops before, it's understandable that he's taking a little more time," said Minister Sun of the Ministry of War.

His words held the unspoken implication that due to the first prince's lack of previous battle experience, he couldn't possibly win in less than a year. A marshal like Prince Cheng, who could eliminate two vassal kings in four months, was unlikely to appear even once every hundred years. On the surface, Minister Sun might have appeared to be excusing the first prince, but he was in fact praising Jing Shao.

"That is correct. Your Majesty, quelling a rebellion is not something that can be accomplished overnight. If the first prince is given a little more time, perhaps he might yet prove himself," another official echoed.

Jing Shao knew that these were all supporters of his brother, and they were trying to prevent the first prince from returning to the court. Both Jing Rong and Jing Yu always claimed the tasks that would benefit them the most, and once they failed, they tried to walk away and wash their hands of it. That would never do; if Jing Rong returned to court, the arduous work of pacifying the Southern Barbarians would end up Jing Shao's responsibility all over again.

Emperor Hongzheng looked at Jing Shao, who had remained silent with his head down. "Jing Shao, what do you think?" When it came to war, Emperor Hongzheng had developed the habit of asking Jing Shao's opinion.

"A war is not won in a single day. The Southern Barbarians are cunning, and with Yunnan-Tibet's treacherous terrain, it will take a long

time before he grasps the trick in winning this war," said Jing Shao, bowing. "Your son believes that First Brother is currently focused on doing his best. It hasn't been that long yet, so it's impossible to predict the result of his efforts. It would be better to give First Brother some more time."

Emperor Hongzheng looked at him with deep, somber eyes. "If we ask you to go, how long would it take you to eliminate the Southern Barbarians?"

Jing Shao's heart turned over in his chest. Choosing his words carefully, he said, "Your son was only able to pacify the two feudatories based on sheer luck. First Brother has the Commander of the Eastern Campaign by his side. Even if I had been sent on this campaign, I would not have been able to do better than they have."

Emperor Hongzheng gave a slight nod, indicating that he believed Jing Shao. After all, Jing Shao had already admitted to him that it wasn't he who pacified Dongnan at all. King Dongnan was simply unlucky and had gotten himself killed by his own concubine. Even though he could tell that Jing Shao had said this because he was too lazy to go back to war, at least he always defended his elder brothers and hadn't disparaged the first prince at all. On that point alone, Emperor Hongzheng was rather pleased.

And so, the matter of the first prince's return was once again postponed. The fourth prince's expression was rather grim, and Jing Chen looked as calm and composed as ever—as though Mount Tai could shake and fall before him and he wouldn't raise an eyebrow. He exchanged a single look with Jing Shao before he took the peerage titles drafted by the Ministry of Rites and headed to the imperial study.

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ONCE MORNING COURT had been dismissed, Jing Shao happened to run into the Imperial Guard Captain Xiao Qian at the side gate.

Xiao Qian pulled Jing Shao into a nook. "Your Highness, I have news."

“What do you mean?” Jing Shao handed him a small golden tortoise.

Xiao Qian chuckled. “Marquise Beiwei entered the palace first thing in the morning.” Stuffing the golden tortoise into his clothes, he whispered, “What a formidable woman. I had a young eunuch in the Palace of Perpetual Peace look into it for me. Apparently, Countess Yongchang was so angry she almost passed out.”

Countess Yongchang was apparently back to crying and complaining in front of the Palace of Perpetual Peace again, right after breakfast, repeating over and over that Earl Yongchang’s clan had been virtuously loyal for generations, yet now they’d fallen so far that they had to suffer abuses in silence. Their ancestor had risked his life to help the founding emperor win the empire, only to result in a boy who was barely of age being granted a marquisate! How could the noble houses possibly suffer such an overwhelming humiliation?

At this point, Marquise Beiwei arrived and without so much as a *by your leave* began weeping as well, sobbing even more bitterly than Countess Yongchang.

She recounted how the son of Duke Mao’s family had pushed the heir of Marquis Beiwei into the river during the third nine-day period of winter, and that her son was still bedridden alongside one of her nephews, while the other got frostbite on both feet. The House of Beiwei had been virtuously loyal for generations, and their noble ranking was merely a bit lower than Duke Mao’s, that was all, but to think they would be forced to suffer in silence in this way! Their ancestor had risked his life to help the founding emperor win the empire, only to end up getting forced into such a corner that they almost lost the family line.

Countess Yongchang was stunned by her words, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu. But Duke Mao had allied with her clan, so she felt obliged to defend them somehow, asking Lady Du why she thought it had been the House of Mao that pushed her son into the water.

Marquise Beiwei ignored her and kept carrying on, saying that the empress had promised to arrange a good marriage for her daughter, but her daughter was about to become an old maid and there was still no prospect of a match. Then she accused Earl Yongchang’s grandson of destroying one of her medicinal herbs, which she’d spent three years personally cultivating

to treat her mother-in-law’s illness. Now that the herbs had been destroyed, her mother-in-law’s health was worsening by the day, yet the Yongchang family hadn’t even offered so much as an apology.

At this, Countess Yongchang was so shocked she almost fainted. All her grandson had done was break off a few golden-and-silver honeysuckle branches at the Beiwei Estate. What, could their clan not afford a simple cooling medicinal herb that cost just a few coppers for a whole tael?

Jing Shao put his fist up against his lips when he heard this, failing to hold back a muffled laugh.

Recounting these events, Xiao Qian couldn't help but laugh as well.

"It sure was lively at the Palace of Perpetual Peace today. Several of the concubines making their courtesy visits saw them too, and all of them hurriedly excused themselves, trying not to laugh."

"Did the empress dowager say anything?"

Jing Shao privately thought, *Marquise Beiwei sure is something else, ready to douse those two other noble houses in whatever shit she can dig up.* While there was bad blood between the heir to the House of Mao and Mu Lingbao, and Jing Shao had even once seen the two of them having a fight in The Flavor of Nostalgia over the summer, his fall into the moat had absolutely nothing to do with the House of Mao.

"The empress dowager was so irritated by the commotion the two of them were making that she drove both women out of the palace and said she wasn't going to concern herself with their problems any longer," said Xiao Qian, still laughing. After causing such a fuss, the two women had become quite famous in the capital.

Jing Shao cheerfully thanked Xiao Qian for all his help, then he mounted Shadow and hurried home so he could tell his consort all about this as soon as possible.

Sitting in his palanquin, Minister Sun saw Jing Shao gallop by his window and immediately called out to stop him. "Your Highness!"

Whinnying, Shadow abruptly stopped in his tracks, rearing back to paw at the air with his front hooves before he trotted back a few steps.

"What's wrong?" Jing Shao frowned.

He was in a hurry to get back so he could have breakfast with his consort. Junqing had said that he would make fried veggie dumplings for him today!

“There are some issues at the Ministry of War today that need Your Highness’s judgment, so please, you really must come by,” said Minister Sun, exasperated.

It was bad enough that this imperial pain in the neck always showed up late and checked out early, but since he’d returned from his campaign, he hadn’t even made a single appearance at the Ministry of War.

Jing Shao waved a hand to show he understood. “Got it.”

His brother had already briefed him today on his plan to find an excuse to bring down that old scoundrel Song An. He figured that that was what Minister Sun wanted to talk to him about.

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“JUNQING, I’M BACK!” Jing Shao shouted excitedly as soon as he entered the east wing.

Mu Hanzhang quickly finished applying ointment to his hand, then turned and went out to greet him.

“Where are my vegetable dumplings?” Jing Shao asked as he cheerfully pulled his consort into his arms.

Mu Hanzhang had the aroma of food clinging to him, which smelled incredibly appetizing. He helplessly tucked his head into the crook of that pale neck to drink his scent in. It tickled, so Mu Hanzhang gently pushed him away and pointed at the plate on the table.

Several exquisite dishes had been laid out over it, all served on white porcelain plates. Only the platter in the center of the table was made of wood, and it was filled with round vegetable dumplings fried to a golden crisp. Next to it, there was even a small celadon bowl filled with garlic dipping sauce.

Jing Shao couldn’t wait until he sat down, so he picked up one with his chopsticks, dipped it into the sauce, and ate it in one bite. It was crispy and savory, and so delicious that he couldn’t help but want more.

Eating a second dumpling, he spoke with his mouth full. “Junqing, you’re amazing. You’ve never even cooked before, but this is absolutely delicious!”

Exasperated, Mu Hanzhang pulled him into his seat and served him a bowl of rice porridge. Jing Shao had refused to get out of bed this morning and insisted on clinging to him. In the end, Mu Hanzhang had had no choice but to promise to make him vegetable dumplings in order to coax him out the door.

“I didn’t exactly make it myself. The cook already had everything prepared, and all I had to do was shape them into balls and fry them.” Mu Hanzhang rested his left hand on his leg, eating only with his right hand.

“That’s amazing enough!” Jing Shao picked up a dumpling and held it up to Mu Hanzhang’s lips.

Mu Hanzhang couldn’t refuse, so he opened his mouth to bite off half of it. Before he could eat the rest, Jing Shao had already turned his chopsticks and placed the rest into his own mouth. He did it so naturally, Mu Hanzhang didn’t feel he could say anything, and he simply pressed his lips together, slowly sipping his porridge.

Jing Shao piled more food into his consort’s bowl with his chopsticks, but he kept getting a feeling that something was off. It wasn’t until he ate the last dumpling that he realized Junqing’s left hand had remained under the table all this time! Because his manners had always been impeccable, even when he only used one hand, his gestures remained elegant and smooth, so it’d taken the entire meal for Jing Shao to notice. Instead of asking, he simply snatched the hand out from under the table.

Mu Hanzhang sucked in a sharp breath, but by the time he tried to pull away, it was already too late to hide. On his smooth little finger, two clear blisters were laid bare before Jing Shao’s eyes.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao’s brows drew together, his heart aching terribly for him.

The joy from eating vegetable dumplings immediately evaporated.

“This is nothing. It’ll be fine in a couple of days.” Mu Hanzhang sighed.

As the saying went, “a gentleman stays far from the kitchen,” so he’d basically never been inside one. It looked simple enough when he’d watched the cook do it, but when he tried it himself, he was all thumbs.

“You’re not allowed to cook again,” Jing Shao announced.

He sent someone for crushed ice, then wrapped the ice in a silk cloth and carefully set it on top of the blister.

The cooling sensation eased the burning pain. Mu Hanzhang watched as Jing Shao carefully applied ointment, then gently blew on the wound with a serious expression that probably only ever surfaced when he was studying formation diagrams. A smile curled at the corner of Mu Hanzhang’s lips. His heart felt so warm that he thought that even though he’d ended up with a blistered hand, it had been entirely worth it.

“You should stay home for the next couple of days. If the wound gets cold, it’ll scar.” Jing Shao held that smooth, jade-like hand, feeling deeply distressed.

“An edict from the emperor!” Their discussion was interrupted by an announcement coming from outside, and they exchanged a look.

Mu Hanzhang asked Duofu to go greet the eunuch messenger entourage, then took Jing Shao into their inner chambers to quickly change before going to the front courtyard to listen to the edict.

The eunuch glanced at Prince Cheng and his consort, who knelt on the ground before him and unfurled a golden-yellow scroll embroidered with five-colored dragons.

“Princely Consort Cheng, Mu Hanzhang, please accept this decree!”

Chapter 79:
Investiture of a Marquis

"BY THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN, His Majesty proclaims: Mu Hanzhang, the rightful consort of Prince Cheng, of vast learning and exceptional intellect, has repeatedly distinguished himself on the battlefield and proved his worth beyond doubt. In recognition of his accomplishments as a member of the imperial family, he is hereby granted the title of marquis of the first rank, styled Marquis Wenyuan. Though placed among the ranks of military officers, he shall serve in a civil capacity. The investiture ceremony shall be held in seven days. This is decreed!" The eunuch's voice was shrill yet forceful, each word ringing out with force and clarity, delivered with deliberate weight.

"This one, Mu Hanzhang, obediently accepts this decree. Long live His Majesty!" Mu Hanzhang kowtowed and accepted the edict with both hands.

The announcing eunuch finally relaxed his expression. "Congratulations, Your Lordship."

Jing Shao was the first to leap to his feet, then extended a hand to help his consort up. Mu Hanzhang held the imperial edict, only finally grasping the fact that he was actually going to be invested with the title of marquis once the bright yellow scroll was in his hand. He turned to look at Jing Shao, who gave him a reassuring smile.

Duofu had already brought the gold and silver to reward the eunuchs with, and so Jing Shao gestured with his chin to hand it over to the eunuch who'd delivered the edict.

The old eunuch and the group of young eunuchs behind him beamed with joy. Mu Hanzhang came back to himself and smiled in return, saying, "Thank you for your hard work, everyone."

"Thank you, Your Lordship, for the gifts, for we get to share in your good fortune as well!"

The eunuchs split the reward money between them, all of them overjoyed. In an age of peace, it was rare for a marquisate to be granted, so even if they were announcing the appointment of a prime minister, they usually wouldn't receive such a generous gift.

Jing Shao invited the eunuchs to come in for a cup of tea, but they were in a hurry to get back to the palace. As they were about to leave, he casually asked, "Eunuch Yuan, I noticed that Second Brother only went to the imperial study after morning court. How did the imperial edict get issued so quickly?"

Eunuch Yuan sighed. "It's all because those two ladies were making such a fuss!"

Eunuch Yuan served in the emperor's study, so he would know a bit more than the others. He looked left and right, then whispered, "The empress dowager was so annoyed that she couldn't stand it anymore, so she told someone to tell His Majesty to hurry up and get this done to stop anyone else from causing a commotion. It just so happened that His Highness Prince Rui had already decided on the title, so His Majesty issued the edict right away."

Jing Shao smiled at his explanation and pressed a little golden Buddha into his hands.

Mu Hanzhang stared at the words on the imperial edict and couldn't help feeling a bit emotional. He never would have thought that his title would actually be "the Erudite Marquis" Wenyuan. That was the name he'd earned at poetry gatherings in the capital. With the return of this title, it felt as though he'd never actually lost his youthful spirit and pride.

Seeing how focused Mu Hanzhang's attention was on that scroll, Jing Shao didn't say anything to disturb him. Instead, he wrapped his arms around him from behind, gathering him gently into his embrace.

Mu Hanzhang turned to look up at him. "Aren't you going to the Ministry of War today?"

"I'll go in the afternoon." Jing Shao reached out to hold the imperial edict for him, using this exchange to grab his left hand to check on those blisters. "My consort has been just granted the title of marquis, so I should naturally stay home to have lunch with His Lordship."

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare; Jing Shao was just slacking off and using him as an excuse. “Ever since we came back you’ve gotten even lazier. Careful, someone might file a formal complaint against you for resting on your laurels.”

Jing Shao was unconvinced. He kept his arms around Mu Hanzhang and shuffled the two of them toward their rooms. “If I suddenly became more diligent, *that’s* when someone would file a formal complaint against me for harboring impure motives.”

Come to think of it, Mu Hanzhang supposed that was true. An emperor’s heart was difficult to fathom, so it was inadvisable to be either too enthusiastic or too lazy. Better to stick to his old ways: Be a fisherman that fished for three days, then spent two days sunning his nets. Mu Hanzhang didn’t argue any further, dragging the man draped over his shoulders back to the east wing.

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EVEN THOUGH JING CHEN advocated for simplicity in the grand investiture ceremony, the essential rituals remained cumbersome.

Over the next seven days, an incessant stream of guests came over to offer their congratulations. Officials from the Ministry of Rites also frequently visited to make inquiries, and even Jing Chen made two separate visits.

“I plan to transfer Song An to Xinan,” said Jing Chen blandly, taking a sip of tea.

Jing Shao nodded. They’d found enough dirt on Song An over the past little while to demote him three ranks in a row and send him off to a remote area to serve as a minor county official. Song An had, after all, contributed a lot to their cause over the years, so they shouldn’t be too unforgiving.

“Song An gave me these.” Jing Chen placed a stack of letters on the table. “All he asks is that he be allowed to take his daughter with him.”

Mu Hanzhang picked up the letters, and as he scanned them, a crease appeared in his brow. They contained evidence against quite a few officials that if brought out into the open could take down many people.

He sighed and said, “Song An is truly devoted to his daughter.”

Hearing his reaction, Jing Shao knew that Mu Hanzhang was thinking of all the ways Marquis Beiwei had acted when it came to his second son. He reached out and took his hand.

“It’s precisely because he spoiled her too much that she turned out that way.”

Jing Shao was trying to comfort him, and so he nodded.

“Has Marquis Beiwei been by in the past couple of days?” Jing Chen glanced down at the tiger pelt rug that had somehow materialized at Mu Hanzhang’s feet.

“Father hasn’t been here, actually,” Mu Hanzhang replied.

Noticing that Jing Chen was looking down at his feet, he followed his gaze to discover that Li’l Sunbeam had lain down at his feet at some point and was sleeping soundly while clutching his shoes. The corners of his mouth curled up into a smile before he knew it.

“Is this the tiger you’ve been keeping?” Jing Chen took a closer look. “It’s pretty solid.”

“He eats more than I do, so he’d better be solid!”

Jing Shao plucked the tiger cub off the floor. The little guy had already grown quite long; when he stood on his hind legs, he was almost as tall as a man sitting down. He couldn’t be easily picked up by the scruff anymore.

“Raarh!” Very displeased at being disturbed, Li’l Sunbeam bared his teeth at Jing Shao, waving his thick, furry paws.

Jing Chen was staring longingly at Li’l Sunbeam, but due to his strict adherence to decorum, he couldn’t move around in his seat. Noticing this, Mu Hanzhang handed Jing Chen a piece of jerky, which left the prince quite puzzled. The reason soon became clear, as that chunky ball of fur quickly bounded over to him, putting two paws on his thigh to eagerly eye the jerky in his hand.

Jing Chen stared at the tiger blankly for a moment, then held out the jerky. The cub snapped it up and swallowed it but kept clinging to Jing Chen’s knees, eager to discover if he was hiding more jerky.

When Jing Shao saw how stiffly his brother was holding himself, he stifled a laugh, then urged him to see how the fur felt. “You can touch him.”

Slowly, Jing Chen lifted up a hand and lowered it over the little tiger cub’s head. He rarely did this kind of thing; just like the last time he’d patted Jing Shao on the head, he seemed unfamiliar with the gesture.

A smile also surfaced in Mu Hanzhang's eyes, and he found just the right moment to say, "I appreciate all your work in regard to this investiture ceremony, Brother. I don't know how to properly thank you."

"The best way to thank me would be to continue to look after Jing Shao." Jing Chen gave those soft, furry ears a squeeze and quietly added, "Even though this isn't a hereditary marquisate, it will give you the same rank at court as Marquis Beiwei. After the investiture ceremony, you'll be able to attend morning court. I will not be in the capital during the Third Month, so please, keep an eye on Jing Shao for me during court assembly."

Jing Shao didn't know how to respond to this. How come his brother sounded like he was asking someone to babysit him?

"There's a lion being kept in the Wading Gardens that is about the same size as our tiger cub. If you go to Jiangnan, you can visit Pingjiang to see him." As Jing Chen was heading to Jiangnan to meet with King Huainan, Mu Hanzhang suggested he seek him out at the Wading Gardens.

Jing Chen gave a slight nod. The Spring Imperial Examination would begin on the 9th of the Second Month, and the Ministry of Rites was overwhelmed; moreover, he was required to find new talent among the graduates. So, he had requested an assignment to Jiangnan in the Third Month.

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THE GRAND INVESTITURE CEREMONY was held as scheduled, and Jing Shao personally dressed his consort in his new robes. All ceremonial attire of third rank and above was purple, and while princely consorts were first rank, marquises were of superior rank. Thus, what used to be embroidered cranes on his purple robes had been replaced with elaborate, intricate patterns of cloud motifs.

Marquis Beiwei was also in attendance, and when he saw Mu Hanzhang kneel on the stage, saw Emperor Hongzheng personally tying the headdress over his hair, heard the bells tolling, heard the drums thundering,

and heard every official of the court offering their congratulations, he felt regret. If he'd handed over the position of Marquis Beiwei to Hanzhang, he might have been able to turn the Mu clan into the most prosperous family in the Chen Empire. But now, it was too late; talented young men were rare in the Mu clan this generation, and if things continued as they were, the downfall of the family would come within three generations.

Jing Shao couldn't care less how full of lament Marquis Beiwei was. As he sat there, his eyes never once left the man on the stage. Mu Hanzhang had finally, truly shed the oppression and melancholy of the harem. Like a sacred saber drawn from its sheath, he was dazzling in his radiance, not a hint of his sharpness dulled despite all the hardships he'd endured. Now, his brilliance was evident to all under heaven, and no one would dare push him around again.

And once the ceremony was over, Mu Hanzhang would be able to attend court.

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THE IMPERIAL COURT that Mu Hanzhang had once spent years studying for but failed to attain entry to was now a place that he could visit every day, yet when he actually stood there, he felt none of the excitement he'd imagined. The Hall of Supreme Harmony ultimately wasn't a place for games. He didn't believe he was qualified to meddle in court affairs only using the conclusions he'd drawn from books, which meant he rarely spoke and stood quietly at Marquis Beiwei's side, exchanging an occasional glance with Jing Shao but nothing more.

The high-ranking officials at court were initially quite wary of this Marquis Wenyuan who'd come out of nowhere. His Majesty intended for him to hold a civil official's post despite his investiture as a marquis, which was a martial title. This made his rank higher than those officials who'd entered the civil service through the imperial examinations. They worried that he would start bossing them around, but when they discovered that Mu Hanzhang spoke sparingly, remaining mild-mannered and courteous and

never putting on airs as a marquis, they gradually became less opposed to his presence.

In the blink of an eye, it was already the Second Month. Lady Qiu's pregnancy could no longer remain a secret, so Mu Hanzhang asked Doctor Jiang to check her pulse once every seven days and temporarily sent Ge Ruoyi to serve his mother.

Once Mu Hanzhang had received his title, Lady Qiu's status within the Beiwei Estate had risen accordingly, to the extent that many of the servants considered the madam's status to actually be higher than that of the marquise. After all, Mu Lingbao was only an heir, while Mu Hanzhang was already a marquis. Marquise Beiwei was upset, but there was nothing she could say; after all, she couldn't just drive away a handmaiden who'd been sent here by a marquis.

Not to mention, her people didn't yet dare try anything since she'd been repeatedly warned against it by Marquis Beiwei. Despite this, all Lady Qiu's recent good fortune had still left Marquise Beiwei feeling quite frustrated.

By the 7th day of the Second Month, the capital was already teeming with examinees who had arrived to take the Civil Service Examination. In every teahouse and tavern one looked, there were scholars and literati. Of course, many of the idle rich could also be found whiling away most of their time in these kinds of establishments; for instance, the often-delinquent Prince Cheng, Jing Shao.

"To be granted a marquisate overnight is better than ten years of diligent study."

In The Flavor of Nostalgia, several provincial graduates huddled together at one table, engaging in lively conversation.

"If that's the case, there's no point in taking the imperial examination at all. We might as well just marry some member of the imperial family or some other noble," one of them retorted.

"Hmph, if you want to marry one, you'll have to find someone who'd want you, first," the man who'd brought up the topic said cheerfully. "I got to the capital just after the Spring Festival, just in time for Marquis Wenyuan's grand investiture ceremony."

“So, what did this Marquis Wenyuan look like?” a young man couldn’t help but ask, leering slightly.

The first man took a breath, glanced around, then said slowly, “I didn’t get a good look.”

This immediately drew a murmured wave of “what a pity.”

“If you ask me, I bet he looks like…” The sleazy young man suddenly whispered something close to inaudible, and a moment later, everyone at the table burst out laughing.

“You rotten scoundrels!” Jing Shao suddenly smacked the table, sending a wine cup at the edge flying to the ground, shattering into pieces with a crash.

As he’d arrived late, there had been no more private dining rooms, so he’d sat down in the main hall, only to overhear these audacious people openly gossiping about his princely consort. Plus, many of their remarks were insolent and inappropriate—truly outrageous!

Confused, the provincial graduates turned around to find a tall, finely dressed man glaring at them angrily, only then realizing what had happened.

“Sir, why are you attacking us for no reason?”

Chapter 80:
Civil Service Examination

“Attacking you? I’ll show you attacking!” Without another word, Jing Shao grabbed the man by the collar and punched him to the floor.

Seeing the situation escalate, all the other men at the table tried to pull Jing Shao away, only to each end up punched to the floor as well.

The sleazy-looking young man covered his left eye and climbed to his feet, pointing at Jing Shao with a finger that trembled in rage along with the rest of his body.

“You… You dare strike a provincial graduate…!”

All these young men were ranked scholars, and back in their hometowns, people always sucked up to them and tried to get on their good side. They’d never suffered such an insult!

But soon, the first scholar to get knocked down realized that even though they were creating such a scene, not a single guest had come forward to break up the fight. In fact, some of the elegantly dressed guests were watching them as if enjoying a show.

Most of the prominent figures present knew what Prince Cheng looked like, and the other provincial graduates were about to take the metropolitan exams, so they weren’t about to stick their necks out. If they ended up offending someone influential in the capital, a decade of diligent study would be all in vain, so they kept their heads down and their mouths shut, hurrying to finish their food and leave.

“Just based on what all of you were saying, you’d still need a beating even if you’d just been appointed the new Primus Scholar!” growled Jing Shao.

He was about to get right up in the young man’s face again to keep punching when a smooth and slender hand caught his wrist.

It was a beautiful hand; though it belonged to a man, the skin was smooth and clear, as if it had been carefully carved out of the finest white nephrite jade.

The scholars' gazes followed the hand to find a man at the other end of it dressed in a sapphire-blue long robe with wide sleeves. That fabric was clearly special; in fact, anyone who knew their stuff would recognize it as tribute satin, the same material that had been used to make Jing Shao's clothes.

"What are you doing, already starting a fight? I was barely late." This was spoken by a gentle voice, rather pleasant to the ear.

The one who had just arrived was none other than Mu Hanzhang.

As Mu Hanzhang was completely new to the imperial court, Emperor Hongzheng had not granted him a substantive official post despite his new title. So, paired with Jing Shao, Mu Hanzhang was the only other person at court with nothing to do. However, Jing Chen had been swamped with work lately and often asked him to come help out at the Ministry of Rites, which was why Jing Shao had arrived early to reserve a seat and wait for his consort to come meet him for lunch.

When Jing Shao caught sight of his consort, the menacing look on his face instantly transformed into a smile.

"No, I noticed that they seemed quite talented, so I decided to spar with them for a bit."

Mu Hanzhang glanced at the frail scholars with their black eyes—what about them made them look like skilled warriors to him, exactly?

Receiving a glare from his consort, Jing Shao huffed, then leaned in close to his ear to give him an idea of what happened.

Once he was caught up, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but smile. "These provincial graduates are merely not learned enough, only making such distasteful comments because they feared the shame of failing the exam. There is no need to stoop to their level."

Though these words were theoretically meant to mollify his husband, Mu Hanzhang had said all this at the same volume he usually spoke with.

He didn’t raise his voice, but it was still enough for everyone present to catch every word.

“Pfft…” The Right Guardian, who’d been sitting in the corner, trying very hard to look as inconspicuous as possible, couldn’t help but spit out his mouthful of tea. Their strategist’s tendency to bear grudges really hadn’t changed one bit.

The Left Guardian silently took the towel from the attendant’s shoulder and handed it to him.

Jing Shao turned toward them, giving them a look that meant *“I’ll deal with you two later.”*

The Right Guardian immediately choked on his remaining half mouthful of tea.

The sleazy-looking scholar had assumed Mu Hanzhang was here to put an end to the other man’s misconduct, but it seemed like he was actually here to make things worse.

“You… You two… This is an outrage!”

“Sir, there is no feud or ill will between us, so why are you lashing out at us so rudely?” The leader of the group had gone pale with fury, but at least he’d retained some reason.

The Right Guardian was skipping out on work today and had dragged the Left Guardian out sightseeing, but now that they’d been discovered by His Highness, there was no point in trying to stay hidden, so he decided to butt in.

“Why, that’s strange. All this gentleman said was that some uneducated people were spouting unpleasant things. As you surely haven’t said anything distasteful, I can’t imagine why you’d put yourself down like that!”

“You—!”

Even though these scholars had heads crammed full of classical literature, when it came to bickering or trading insults, they were no match for the Right Guardian who verbally sparred with soldiers every day. All the leader could do was tremble with impotent rage, and when he noticed that the Right Guardian was dressed in martial artist robes and was armored

head to toe in the demeanor of a hardened army brute, he didn't want to engage with him at all anyway.

Instead, he turned to Mu Hanzhang. "Since you've questioned our knowledge, why don't we have us a little debate?"

Mu Hanzhang chuckled. "I ask you this: What gives you the right to pontificate in such a manner?"

"The founding emperor encouraged freedom of speech throughout the land, so major affairs of the state should naturally be discussed and studied by scholars." Reminding himself of this made him and his fellows immediately feel justified and emboldened.

"And what is the state?" Mu Hanzhang quickly responded.

"The state naturally refers to the empire, which is to say the major affairs that affect the imperial state. When we discuss the princes or the nobles, or point out societal problems, it is all for the sake of the state," said the sleazy-looking young man, his mung-bean sized eyes narrowed in a squint.

"The god of the land in five colors is called She, while the god of the five grains is called Hou Ji. The characters for 'She Ji' that we use to represent 'the state' point to both the land and its people. Those of us who are scholars should first be loyal to our ruler above and also be mindful of the people's livelihood below, of their toil and labor for all living beings under heaven." Mu Hanzhang's gaze swept over them. "Yet, you do not think of the land and its people, and instead envy those who rise to the top in a single bound. You are a disgrace to the literati—not even as worthy as the old farmer tilling his field. For he, at least, has contributed his own strength to the *state*."

"Well said!" a neatly dressed provincial graduate at a neighboring table couldn't help cheering. "Sir, your words are like sweet enlightenment poured from above. You have my deepest respect."

"Well said!" When those at the other tables had processed what he'd said, they cheered along as well.

Mu Hanzhang seemed unmoved, calmly turning to face Jing Shao. After such a disturbance, he was no longer in the mood to eat here. Jing

Shao took his consort's hand and led him and his two crestfallen subordinates along to search for another suitable restaurant.

After the four of them had left, the man who'd started the cheering walked up to the counter to the proprietor, who'd been calmly balancing the books during the whole affair. "Might I ask, boss, who were those two gentlemen?"

Zhou Jin couldn't even be bothered to look up. His abacus continued to clack away as he said, "The capital is filled to the brim with the powerful and the noble, so why bother asking about those two in particular, good sir?"

"Well, I was thinking that that gentleman in blue spoke so eloquently and seemed to possess such exceptional literary talent that he might just become this year's new Primus Scholar. I'm just interested in getting to know him," said the man, making no effort to hide his intentions.

"That one would be the very Marquis Wenyuan you were all just discussing," said Zhou Jin, slowly and deliberately.

Feeling humiliated, the recently beaten group were just about to pay the bill and leave when they heard him and immediately came to a halt. "What?"

The leader of the group grabbed onto the counter and asked anxiously, "And the one who hit us…?"

"That would of course be Marquis Wenyuan's husband, His Highness Prince Cheng," said Zhou Jin, looking down with amusement as the man turned deathly pale, like he was about to weakly slide to the floor. He quickly reached out to right him and said both warmly and courteously, "Please pay for the cup Prince Cheng smashed as well. That will be seventy coppers in total."

From that day on, Marquis Wenyuan began to develop a reputation as someone who possessed genuine knowledge and ability among the exam-takers.

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THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION began on the ninth day of the Second Month. Jing Shao used to worry that the lively spectacle would make his consort unhappy, but now that he had been made a marquis, it no longer seemed to matter. He even specifically took Mu Hanzhang to the Imperial Exam Hall on Shadow to watch the provincial graduates being searched individually by the soldiers at the gate, looking thoroughly disheveled and undignified in the process.

"Weren't we going to go see Jiang Lang? How did we end up here?" asked Mu Hanzhang.

"You've never taken the Metropolitan Examinations, right? I brought you here to let you see what they're like." Jing Shao chuckled, urging his horse forward to get a closer look. Once he'd seen how miserable these people were, Junqing wouldn't regret marrying him anymore.

Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but smile. "Brother went to a lot of trouble to make sure this goes smoothly. We should leave, to not add to the chaos."

At Doctor Jiang's request, Jing Shao had transferred Jiang Lang to the capital and assigned him to the Imperial Guard as one of the members in charge of guarding the capital's nine gates. Since he had also distinguished himself in the war against the two feudatories, he was given the position of Capital Region Commandant, making him responsible for one of the side gates. Jing Shao specifically instructed that he be put in charge of the East Gate.

Jiang Lang was the same as always and bowed respectfully at the sight of the two. "Greetings, Your Highness, Your Lordship."

"Are you doing all right here?" Mu Hanzhang asked him, smiling.

Jiang Lang was quick on his feet and diligent, so he was sure to be valued wherever he went.

"To answer Your Lordship, while guarding the gates keeps me shielded from the elements, standing in the same spot everyday is nowhere near as satisfying as serving in the army." Jiang Lang smiled shyly.

If it wasn't for his father's constant prodding and eventual direct request to His Highness, he truly wouldn't have chosen to leave the army

himself.

“Now that there aren’t any wars, there isn’t much to do in the army, anyway. The left and right guardians even sneaked out and came to the capital the other day. They’re really envious of you!” Jing Shao laughed heartily, patting Jiang Lang on the shoulder.

“I understand.” Jiang Lang smiled. “But whenever Your Highness returns to the battlefield, you must take me with you. I haven’t had the chance to fight properly yet!”

This was true; he’d spent his entire time with the army serving as a bodyguard and running errands for Their Highnesses. He’d rarely had the opportunity to charge onto the battlefield and face their foes.

After bidding farewell to Jiang Lang, Jing Shao headed toward the eastern outskirts with his consort in tow. He allowed Shadow to gallop at full tilt for a while before he turned the horse around and took them back about a mile. Then he scanned left and right before darting into a swath of overgrown woods.

This desolate woodland was the land Mu Hanzhang had inherited. Even now, the grass still grew up to their knees, and there were brambles and thorny plants everywhere.

Jing Shao held Mu Hanzhang close and pulled him against his chest. “Hold on tight and hide your hands in your sleeves. Careful they don’t get scratched.”

Mu Hanzhang had no idea why he was being taken somewhere like this, and the branches surrounding them kept coming perilously close to his eyes, so he obliged, burying his face in that wide, warm chest, then hiding his hands in his sleeves before tucking them behind Jing Shao.

Mu Hanzhang nestling warmly into his arms with only minor prompting drove Jing Shao to distraction. He slowed down a little, and with one hand on the reins and one hand wrapped around that supple waist, he asked, “Junqing, can we stay at the villa tonight?”

Tomorrow was the tenth day of the Second Month, which fell on Imperial Leave, so there was no morning court tomorrow. Ever since his consort also began to have to attend court, Jing Shao had been considerate of his health and avoided overexerting him each night for fear that he might

not be able to stand for all those hours. But being forced to starve himself on half a meal every single day felt awful, so whenever it was time for Imperial Leave, he always made sure to eat his fill.

Naturally, Mu Hanzhang understood what he meant. Since the horse was still galloping, he didn’t look up and simply replied with a hum in his throat as agreement.

Although his voice was very quiet, Jing Shao heard it loud and clear as it vibrated through his chest. He couldn’t help but grin, and he quickened their pace.

Before long, they bolted out of the overgrown woodland, and Jing Shao patted the man in his arms.

When Mu Hanzhang turned to see the scene before him, his eyes widened with surprise. Somehow, deep within the forest of scattered rocks and bramble was a vast open clearing, and within that clearing dozens of tents had been erected, with soldiers moving about. In the center, a group of soldiers was performing drills in an area designated as a training ground, but they were keeping completely silent—none of them shouted commands or battle cries, making it feel exceedingly strange.

Chapter 81:
Unauthorized Militia

"WHAT IS THIS?" Mu Hanzhang frowned, looking to Jing Shao for an explanation.

"Preparing for the worst; that's all." Jing Shao smiled and took him for a walk around the camp.

The camp could accommodate several thousand soldiers, although there were fewer than a thousand here now, and they had been outfitted with equipment similar to Prince Cheng's vanguard battalion.

Jing Shao walked to the stable and looked at the empty stalls. "The men here have to be recruited gradually, and all of them are being brought in from outside the capital."

"This is what the horses you bought from Father are for?" Marquis Beiwei had mentioned to him that he would soon be transporting horses from the northwest to the capital in small batches.

"Mm-hmm," said Jing Shao, and holding onto the wooden rail of the horse trough, he climbed up and sat down, swinging his legs in contentment.

Staring out at the soldiers as they performed their silent drill made him feel perfectly at ease somehow. This unauthorized militia was his final trump card. If he'd possessed this force in his previous life, as long as he could've gotten out of prison, he would have had nothing to fear.

"But this is an unauthorized militia. If anyone ever finds out, they could file a formal complaint against you for planning to stage a coup against the throne," Mu Hanzhang said, gravely concerned.

Jing Shao jumped down and pulled the frowning man into his arms, kissing him on the cheek. "I've got it all covered. Don't worry."

Those dozens of miles from the capital to Wangyue Hill still haunted him, the very thought of the perilous escape making his breath catch in his throat, and he tightened his arms around Mu Hanzhang despite himself.

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MU HANZHANG STAYED QUIET as they returned to the villa. The overgrown woodland was only seven miles from the capital—close enough to see fireworks being set off in the city—and if they were given fast horses, it would take only an hour to reach the East Gate.

With this detachment of troops, even if Jing Shao wanted to force his way into the palace, he'd be perfectly capable. If this was ever exposed, the consequences would be unthinkable. Moreover, maintaining an unauthorized militia was not something that could be done with just a few thousand taels of silver—it was essentially a bottomless pit and would require him to constantly pour money into it…

Noticing how deep in thought the man in his arms was, Jing Shao didn't disturb him, merely pulled him in a little closer so that he could sit more comfortably. Then, he headed straight for the villa on a familiar route.

In the spring thaw of the Second Month, it was cold, but not too cold, which made it the perfect time to get into a hot spring.

Mu Hanzhang didn't notice what was happening until his outer robes were being undone, and he found himself already standing next to the hot spring pool as Jing Shao enthusiastically unfastened his robes.

Mu Hanzhang grew red instantly, snatched his belt back from Jing Shao, and tried to tie it back on. "It's broad daylight…"

"When it's cold, daytime is the best time to soak in the hot springs. Once the nighttime chill sets in, it'll be too cold for you," said Jing Shao with utter seriousness.

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare and glanced at the hot spring pool behind him.

Second Month marked the height of the camellia blooming season, and the gardener had blanketed the open space by the pond with white and pale pink flowers, the blossoms blooming like a veil of smoke that covered the ground. The day was a little gloomy and overcast, with the sun shining

through a thick layer of clouds. It made everything look washed out save for the flowers, vibrant and bright amid all the gray. With the mist that rose out of the hot spring, it felt like they'd accidentally stepped into a celestial realm.

Jing Shao stripped off his clothes ahead of Mu Hanzhang and hopped into the hot spring with a splash. When he enthusiastically resurfaced, water sprayed onto Mu Hanzhang's clothes.

"Junqing, come on in."

With honey-colored skin wrapped around smoothly contoured muscles and a well-proportioned frame without a trace of excess fat, like a leopard poised to pounce, Jing Shao gave off a wild and dangerous allure. A droplet of water slid from his handsome profile onto his broad chest, detouring around a touch of cherry red before it traced the firm grooves of his abdomen and vanished into the water.

With such a wonderful view, Mu Hanzhang suddenly felt a wave of heat come over him, and hesitantly, he reached down for the knot of his belt.

Jing Shao immediately broke into a grin and stared intently as the other man undressed.

"You— You can bathe first. I'll…"

Mu Hanzhang was so flustered by his staring that he turned away and tried to flee, but Jing Shao couldn't possibly let him get away so easily! He strode out of the water and pulled the would-be escapee back into his arms, his wet body soaking through Mu Hanzhang's robes.

Jing Shao gleefully reached out, his great big wet hand leaving a few more paw prints on Mu Hanzhang's outer garment. "Your clothes are all wet. Let me help you take them off."

Now that his clothes had been soaked through, he clearly couldn't wear them back out again. Mu Hanzhang glared at him and slapped away his wandering hands, only then remembering that this man was naked.

"You… You better get back in the water. I can take this off myself."

There was no real reason for that, as the courtyard was enclosed on all four sides and partially covered by an awning overhead. The hot spring

also poured out steam all year round, so it didn’t feel cold even when someone stood outside the water. But Jing Shao compliantly stepped back into the water anyway and watched as the man on the shore took off his outer garment, then the cotton winter layer, until the soft silk middle layer was revealed…

Abashed by the intensity of Jing Shao’s eyes on him, Mu Hanzhang had no choice but to turn around. He’d only just taken off the middle layer when an arm suddenly wrapped itself around his waist and dragged him into the water.

Just as a startled Mu Hanzhang managed to find his footing, his lips were seized, and whatever he was going to say came out as a moan.

Hot spring water drenched his snow-white underrobe so that it clung tightly to the body beneath, outlining that perfect figure. Two little red dots barely visible beneath the fabric presented a rather enticing sight.

Jing Shao circled his arms tightly around Mu Hanzhang, and as he brushed his lips across Mu Hanzhang’s in a lingering kiss, he teased with one hand through the fabric.

There were thin calluses on his fingers, and his nails were trimmed neat and filed smooth. Somehow, the sensation was magnified with the fabric as a barrier. Mu Hanzhang trembled helplessly, and a low whimper was dragged from his throat. His lower body responded accordingly.

With his skin shielded by the fabric, Jing Shao was confident he couldn’t possibly hurt him, and so he mischievously reached down and grazed his fingernails back and forth over Mu Hanzhang’s cock, which was already at attention.

“Don’t— Ah!” Mu Hanzhang shrank into himself. Such sharp, intense pleasure made it impossible for him to remain standing, and he had to wrap his arms around Jing Shao’s neck to steady himself.

Jing Shao sat down, pulling the man in his arms down to straddle his thighs.

Aided by a smear of fragrant balm, a finger smoothly slid into his body. Mu Hanzhang’s brows furrowed, and his body shifted uncomfortably. Jing Shao had pulled his underpants all the way off but had left him his

underrobe, and he buried his face at Mu Hanzhang's chest to lap his tongue over a nipple before scraping his teeth over the fabric.

As two fingers gently spread him wider, the hot spring's water flowed into Mu Hanzhang's body through the gap between his fingers.

"Ah… It's hot…" Startled by the sudden rush of heat, Mu Hanzhang tightened his arms around Jing Shao's neck in a panic.

In response, Jing Shao angled his face up, and they exchanged a long, gentle kiss. He put his hands beneath the tender flesh of Mu Hanzhang's ass and lifted him, then, after rubbing against his entrance for a moment, suddenly released him.

With the ease of fragrant balm and hot spring water, that great big iron-hard cock pierced into the deepest part of him without resistance. The suddenness forced Mu Hanzhang to arch his back with a groan, a single tear slipping from the corner of one eye to fall into the veil of misted spring water.

The burbling sound of water flowing in from its source was no match for the intense splashing going on in the pool.

With that sensitive place inside of him constantly and rapidly stimulated, Mu Hanzhang was so worked up that he could barely catch his breath. All he could do was beg Jing Shao to, please, slow down a little. Jing Shao listened, though, and he slowed down, then suddenly withdrew from Mu Hanzhang's body.

"Hmm?" Mu Hanzhang seemed a little confused, looking at him with wide, teary eyes.

This made Jing Shao feel it was unbearable to remain outside of him even another second, and he abruptly plunged in once again.

With the action, he pushed some of the scalding spring water back in with him. Having been given brief respite, Mu Hanzhang's body was suddenly stretched to its limits, and he moaned helplessly, unable to hold himself back.

A long time passed before Jing Shao finally stopped, holding the trembling man in his arms to lean against the side of the pool, catching his breath.

Mu Hanzhang lay on his shoulder for a while before he came back to himself, and shifting uncomfortably, he tried to make Jing Shao pull out.

“Mm, don’t move.” Jing Shao immediately held Mu Hanzhang still; his recently softened cock seemed set to raise its head once more.

Mu Hanzhang could of course feel the change that came over him, and he shoved at him in protest. “It’s not good to soak in the water for too long.”

Jing Shao nodded earnestly, wrapped Mu Hanzhang’s long legs around his waist, and stepped out of the pool holding Mu Hanzhang against him. Then, he set him down on the soft daybed next to the pool.

As Mu Hanzhang jostled with each step Jing Shao took, the cock buried inside of him hardened all over again. “You’re…”

He bit his lower lip, but before he could say anything more, the man above him had already started moving again.

The courtyard was filled with steam rising from the hot spring, and the air was moist and warm; camellias twined around the ethereal haze, their snow-white petals tinted a delicate, bashful pink. A sudden gasp broke the silence, and perfect petals, like thin, finely carved pieces of jade, were pushed into the pool by a breeze, landing layer upon layer in a tender, unending embrace.

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IMPERIAL LEAVE WAS MEANT to be a time of bathing and rest. Prince Cheng had been staying in the villa since the ninth day of the Second Month. The villa had numerous hot springs, so there’d certainly been a good deal of bathing, but as for rest…

Just looking at Marquis Wenyuan sleeping soundly on the bed, one could clearly see that this Imperial Leave was actually rather exhausting.

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ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY of the Second Month, the Civil Service Examination ended, but the examinees remained in the capital, every last one waiting eagerly for the exam results to be announced. There were plenty of rumors flying through the city, but no amount of gossip managed to settle their anxious hearts. And despite his lack of participation in the exams, a certain prince was feeling just as anxious as a provincial graduate.

"Junqing, it's been days now; please don't be mad anymore."

Jing Shao pushed the frolicking tiger cub to the edge of the bed and placatingly pulled his wife into his arms. During Imperial Leave, he'd gotten a little too greedy and aggravated his consort. So, once they'd returned to the Prince Cheng Estate, Junqing started bringing the tiger cub to bed.

Mu Hanzhang ignored him, kept his eyes closed, and continued to sleep. That day, he'd racked his brains to come up with a good way to hide Jing Shao's unauthorized militia, but each time he tried to discuss it, Jing Shao would seem to be listening but his hands would always start to wander, and in the end, he'd never manage to finish what he was saying.

Jing Shao leaned over his consort and shook his arm. "Weren't you going to tell me how to hide my army? Tell me already! The curiosity's been killing me for days."

"Waaorh!" Li'l Sunbeam also hopped over to put both paws on Mu Hanzhang's shoulder.

"Get lost, dumbass!" Jing Shao flicked the tiger cub's head.

"Rrowr!" Li'l Sunbeam growled at Jing Shao, clearly irritated. His voice was a little rough, starting to more closely resemble an adult tiger's.

"Sounds like he's growing up." Mu Hanzhang opened his eyes and patted the furry head at his side, then turned over and pushed Jing Shao away, placing the tiger between them. "Go to sleep now; we still have morning court tomorrow."

The tiger cub was laid down on his back and amused himself by kicking his paws in the air. Then he grabbed a lock of Mu Hanzhang's hair

to chew on.

Jing Shao glared furiously at Li'l Sunbeam. "Stupid tiger. I'm turning you into a rug tomorrow!"

Li'l Sunbeam continued to nuzzle his head against Mu Hanzhang's back without reacting to his words at all. Mu Hanzhang couldn't stop a smile from tugging at his pursed lips. He slowly turned around and retrieved his hair from the tiger's mouth.

"Replace all of their weapons with farming tools, keep a few oxen in the stables, then find another place to keep the horses deeper inside the forest. Even if anyone does finds out, we'll have a way to defend ourselves."

He shook the cub's tail in front of Jing Shao, and sure enough, the tiger's attention was drawn to it, and he reached out a paw to bat at the tail.

Jing Shao quickly caught the tiger paw before it could scratch his face. "That really is a good idea."

Mu Hanzhang said nothing and simply brushed Jing Shao's nose with the tiger's tail. "Everything should be done in moderation. You're just always too greedy."

Jing Shao sneezed, then pulled Mu Hanzhang's hand to his face and rubbed his nose on its smooth back. "The Primus Scholar parade will be held in a few days. I've reserved a good spot at The Flavor of Nostalgia. Let's go check out the commotion together."

Chapter 82:
Banquet of the Laureates

AS JING SHAO TRIED TO CHANGE the subject again, Mu Hanzhang's brows furrowed a little, and he brushed the tip of the tiger's tail slowly back and forth with his thumb.

"If you want to see the Primus Scholar, the Banquet of the Laureates is right after the parade. Why go through the trouble of watching it from The Flavor of Nostalgia?"

"But that's not the same, is it?" Jing Shao took the furry tail out of his hand and replaced it with his own fingers.

Amused by the childish gesture, Mu Hanzhang squeezed one of his fingers before shaking it. "It's not like I ever stop you from touching me, so why do you have to go overboard every time Imperial Leave comes around? Overindulging in pleasure when you're young is going to come back to haunt you when you get old."

Jing Shao scooted over to his consort's pillow and whispered, "That's not my fault—you're the one who's always so seductive…"

Mu Hanzhang spread his hand and pushed away that big head blowing hot air in his ear. "Speak properly. Why are you keeping those soldiers? What are you trying to do?"

"Rahr!" Li'l Sunbeam saw what his owner was doing and followed suit, patting Jing Shao's face with his furry little paw.

The soft, squishy pad landed on the side of his face, and the fur between his toes brushed Jing Shao's nose, making him sneeze again. Jing Shao grabbed the tiger and stuffed him under the covers, putting his arm over the edge of the quilt so that he couldn't get out.

"I'm merely preparing for the worst. I'm only going to use them as a last resort."

"And what scenario are you preparing for?"

Mu Hanzhang wasn’t about to let him gloss over it like that. The mere discovery of this unauthorized militia would ruin them, and it was also extremely costly. If it wasn’t absolutely necessary, there really was no need to take such a risk.

Jing Shao cast down his eyes and sighed. “All these years, I’ve fought in many wars. I fought all the way from the northwest to the southeast. I’ve never lost a single battle, never lost a single city, and I’ve expanded the territory of the Chen Empire by over three hundred miles. If you were my father, what would you think?”

Mu Hanzhang paused in surprise. “You mean…?”

Once the cunning hare was dead, it was time to cook the hunting hound; once the birds had all been shot, a good bow was stowed away. Through successive dynasties, military generals whose achievements overshadowed the throne were rarely tolerated. But Jing Shao was a prince; could even he not escape suspicion?

“In order for my brother to ascend the throne, I must retain control over a portion of the army—preferably the part stationed in Jiangnan. I’m not sure how many years it’s going to take, and I have no idea what might change during that period, so I have to at least leave an escape route for the two of us.” Jing Shao sighed again.

The circumstances of his past life where he ended up at others’ mercy as soon as he handed over military power could never be allowed to happen again. Even in the worst-case scenario, he had to keep Junqing safe.

Mu Hanzhang looked up at him. Knowing Emperor Hongzheng, even if he favored and trusted Jing Shao now, as soon as he did anything that threatened imperial power, that sagely ruler would depose this son without hesitation. There was no room for negotiation between a son born into an imperial family who had lost his mother’s protection and his emperor father, so perhaps that was why Jing Shao never felt at ease.

When he saw his consort start to look worried, Jing Shao smiled and pinched his cheek. “Don’t worry. I’m just being cautious in case something happens. Besides, we’ve always been careful, so it’ll never come to that anyway.”

Mu Hanzhang gazed at him quietly, then slowly leaned in to press a gentle kiss on the corner of that smiling mouth. “Don’t worry. I’ll watch over you.”

It was a simple phrase, but it consoled Jing Shao better than a thousand words of comfort. He stared, stunned for a moment before he realized that his consort had actually taken the initiative and given him a kiss. It was just a single, gentle kiss, but it filled his heart with such joy, it felt indescribable. And so, he lunged across the bed, ready to return the gesture.

“Raoh?” Li’l Sunbeam, who had been engaged in an epic battle with the quilt, finally won and popped out of the blankets, and the presumptuous Jing Shao ended up with a mouthful of fur.

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AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT of the metropolitan exam results came the palace examination. Every detail was flawlessly planned by the Ministry of Rites, even the most minute, overseen by Jing Chen, and not a single error slipped through. The palace examination was held on time on the twenty-third day of the Second Month, and the top three palace graduates rode on tall horses to parade the streets with red flowers in their hair, the capital buzzing with unmatched excitement.

“I heard that all the successful candidates in this year’s palace exam are promising young talents. What a rare thing, indeed!”

The Flavor of Nostalgia was located right on the main street, and all the seats with a view of the street had been booked up well in advance. The crowd had been boisterous since early in the morning, with everyone chatting away nonstop.

“You’re wrong in that regard. I heard the Secundus Eye is an old man, and it’s the Primus Scholar and Tertius Flower who are young,” someone else retorted.

Jing Shao had reserved the best seats in the house long ago, and he was dragging his consort there to join in on the fun.

Resigned, Mu Hanzhang watched Jing Shao excitedly leaning out the window to peer outside, thinking that Jing Shao looked quite like Li'l Sunbeam sticking his head out the carriage window with his paws on the sill.

"We'll have to rush to the Banquet of the Laureates later. Why put yourself through all this?" he asked.

"I've never watched the Primus Scholar's parade before! I rarely get to be in the capital, so I want to actually see it."

They were the only two people in this private dining room, so Jing Shao didn't bother worrying about decorum and kept looking around in excitement.

Before long, they heard the beating of gongs and drums that cleared the way, and three men dressed in red robes with red flowers in their headdresses rode on great big horses out from Imperial Street.

"Look, Junqing. You see that Tertius Flower? Isn't that the same man who praised you that day at The Flavor of Nostalgia?" Jing Shao pointed him out.

That day, Junqing's argument had rendered those pretentious scholars speechless, and this man had been the first to stand up and applaud, which was why Jing Shao had retained a vague impression of him.

Mu Hanzhang finally moved over to the window, and he indeed found the beaming Tertius Flower somewhat familiar. He nodded, then turned to the Primus Scholar, and he also found that profile quite familiar. As it happened, the Primus Scholar at the front seemed to sense his gaze from above and looked up, meeting Mu Hanzhang's eyes.

How is it him? Mu Hanzhang was a little surprised.

After the Primus Scholar got a good look at Mu Hanzhang's face, he stared blankly at him for a while. Even as his horse went past The Flavor of Nostalgia, he kept looking back behind him.

Jing Shao immediately caught on that something wasn't quite right. He frowned and asked, "You know that Primus Scholar?"

Mu Hanzhang nodded. Although they hadn't seen each other for several years, judging by that person's reaction, it was likely the same person.

"Who is he?" Jing Shao unhappily cupped his consort's face, forcing him to turn away and stop looking at the Primus Scholar.

"He was a classmate from my childhood," Mu Hanzhang explained, pulling away the hand pressing against his cheek.

The man's name was Qin Zhaoran, and as he was a distant relative of the Mu clan, he'd been allowed to study at their clan school. After he'd taken the provincial graduate exam with Mu Hanzhang, he'd returned to his hometown to continue his studies. They hadn't seen each other in years, and he'd never imagined that Qin Zhaoran would actually become the Primus Scholar.

"If you hadn't married me, he never would have had a shot at becoming Primus Scholar." *Fine, as long as he's not an old flame,* Jing Shao muttered inwardly, then quickly put a smile back on his face and took his consort's hand to head downstairs. "Come on, we'll be late if we don't hurry."

The top three palace graduates were required to attend the Banquet of the Laureates, with the presence of all members of the imperial family and nobles mandated, so they both had to attend. Mu Hanzhang was rather resigned to the willful antics of his prince, having no choice but to hurry along behind him.

The main street was filled with people. The two of them rode on Shadow and quickly darted out of an alley, heading straight for the Laureates' Garden.

At the very center of it was a spacious pavilion called the Flower Pavilion, where the emperor and nobles were seated, and the three scholars who topped the Golden List were granted the honor of dining in the company of the Son of Heaven.

By the time the two of them arrived, the rest of the nobles and princes were ready and awaiting Emperor Hongzheng. Jing Chen glared at his little brother, signaling to him that the two of them should both go stand in their places.

Soon, Emperor Hongzheng arrived, and after everyone paid their respects, they took their seats in order of rank.

To scholars, the Banquet of the Laureates was highly significant, which was why it was accompanied by many elaborate rituals, comparable to bowing to the heavens and the ancestors during a wedding. Jing Shao was so bored that he secretly stifled a yawn, only to get a covert kick from Jing Chen under the table, making him sit up straight again. He sent his consort sitting a few seats away a look: *"Poor me,"* it seemed to say.

Mu Hanzhang returned a look that said, *"I wish I could help,"* as he remained seated, the very picture of refined elegance.

The only fun part of the laureates' banquet was probably the ritual of a flower offering from the Tertius Flower. It required the Tertius Flower to recite poetry while picking the most vivid bloom in the garden, then present it to the emperor.

The Tertius Flower was Ma Zhuo, whose eyes hid a resting smile. Emperor Hongzheng must have appointed him as the Tertius Flower because he found his appearance charming, and it was far better for him to present a flower at the Banquet of the Laureates than that old man who'd become the Secundus Eye.

"The flower is offered to us every year. Since this year's Tertius Flower is so young, why not offer the flower to one of our sons instead?" Emperor Hongzheng smiled and raised his hand to stop Ma Zhuo, directing him to present the flower to one of the princes.

The pavilion fell silent, and the once festive atmosphere turned grave in an instant.

A shiver ran through the barely awake Jing Shao, and he sat upright, subtly exchanging a look with Jing Chen. Jing Chen also clearly had no idea why Emperor Hongzheng would suddenly make such a request. The hand hidden in his sleeve quietly clenched and then slowly relaxed again as he waited to see how the Tertius Flower might respond.

The fourth prince was also surprised; he exchanged an utterly bewildered look with Duke Mao, who sat across from him.

A cold sweat immediately broke out over Ma Zhuo's brow. He couldn't simply offer this flower to just anyone—the heir to the throne still

hadn’t been chosen, so it would be inappropriate for him to choose a specific prince. Logically, it would be safest to offer it to Prince Cheng, who had no claim to the throne, but if he did so, the gesture would clearly be read as mockery…

Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes, pondering why His Majesty had chosen to do this. Could it be that someone had recently submitted a memorial requesting that the emperor finally name his heir, which had displeased him, leading to him using this event to put the pressure back on them? As he began to ponder this, a brilliantly blooming flower appeared before his eyes.

“I have long held the talent of Marquis Wenyuan in the highest regard, so this flower ought to be presented to Your Lordship,” said Ma Zhuo with a smile.

Princely Consort Cheng could by rights be considered a son, or at least the son-in-law of the emperor, and was indeed the only scholar among this group of nobles. So, his choice was perfectly reasonable.

Jing Chen quietly approved of the quick-thinking Tertius Flower’s decision. The fourth prince breathed a sigh of relief, while on the other hand, Jing Shao nervously watched his consort, unable to understand how on earth this fire could have spread to Junqing. The new Primus Scholar, Qin Zhaoran, who was seated nearby, looked at Mu Hanzhang with similar concern.

“It would be rude of me to refuse this kindness, Tertius Flower.” Mu Hanzhang stood up and gracefully accepted the pink peony.

“Hanzhang’s talent is indeed a match for the Tertius Flower’s.” A smile gradually came into Emperor Hongzheng’s dark, thoughtful eyes. He signaled for the attendant to hand the cup to Mu Hanzhang. “Since this is a toast to the Tertius Flower, you may drink it on our behalf as well.”

“Certainly, Father.” Mu Hanzhang respectfully bowed to Emperor Hongzheng, then took the cup and drank it down all at once.

With those words, Emperor Hongzheng further elevated Mu Hanzhang’s status. Despite whatever everyone at the table might have been thinking, each of them showed a smile publicly, and the tense atmosphere grew lively once more.

Ma Zhuo withdrew to his seat and quietly wiped away the cold sweat from his palms.

As Qin Zhaoran stared at Mu Hanzhang in the full bloom of his radiance, a quiet sorrow gradually grew in his expression.

Chapter 83:
Old Acquaintance

AFTER THE BANQUET of the Laureates, the Ministry of Personnel began assigning this new group of palace graduates to administrative posts. Xiao Yuan was so busy that his feet barely even touched the ground, and it wasn't until the middle of the Third Month that he finally found some free time.

After the minor incident involving the Tertius Flower's flower presentation, all petitions from the court officials requesting the appointment of a crown prince died down completely. For some reason, Emperor Hongzheng decided to reassign Jing Yu to oversee the Ministry of Justice, and the work of managing foreign tributes was handed over to Marquis Wenyuan. Even though there were only several visits of envoys from foreign lands each year, at least Mu Hanzhang now had a concrete official duty.

There were further selection processes for second- and third-tier graduates that wished to gain official positions, but the top three graduates were directly assigned to posts.

"The Secundus Eye has been assigned to the Hanlin Academy to work as an editor, and Tertius Flower Ma is now at the Ministry of Rites." Xiao Yuan took a sip of tea.

Things at the Ministry of Personnel had finally slowed down; last year, there had been a major investigation at the Ministry of Revenue, then as soon as he was transferred to the Ministry of Personnel, he had had to deal with the Spring Imperial Examination, so he really hadn't seen a moment of respite. Staring at the two people seated across from him who seemed to have ended up with a lot of free time on their hands this entire time, Vice Minister Xiao Yuan suddenly found the heavens rather unjust.

As if noticing the resentment in Xiao Yuan's eyes, Jing Shao said matter-of-factly, "We were fighting a war for over half a year, so naturally we ought to take a break."

Zhou Jin, who'd come over with a tray of flatbread, saw the way Xiao Yuan puffed up with indignance, so he smiled and asked, "Then where has the Primus Scholar been assigned?"

"The fourth prince asked for him for the Ministry of Justice, but apparently, that man requested to become a local magistrate instead." As he spoke of Qin Zhaoran, a strange look came over Xiao Yuan's face. Successful graduates of the palace exams usually wanted nothing more than to stay at the capital, but this man had chosen the exact opposite.

Jing Shao scoffed disdainfully. Prince Rui greatly admired Ma Zhuo's ability to think on his feet at the Banquet of the Laureates, and since the Ministry of Rites happened to need someone with a silver tongue, he'd gone to Emperor Hongzheng to request Ma Zhuo's service. Like the fool he was, Jing Yu actually went straight for the Primus Scholar as if he feared other people wouldn't notice his intention to outshine his older brother.

"With the current state of things, it's better to be dispatched as a magistrate than to be an official in the capital," said Mu Hanzhang deliberately.

Knowing Qin Zhaoran, he undoubtedly had no wish to get involved in the princes' power struggle. The fourth prince trying to win him over to his own faction had only ended up forcing him to leave the capital.

"Jing Yu's always loved to compete with Brother, ever since he was little. Even when he was being named, they felt compelled to give him a character in his name with the jade radical," said Jing Shao disdainfully. They intended to imply that since he was the empress's eldest legitimate son, he should be on the same level as Jing Chen, who had the jade radical in *his* name.

Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but chuckle. It wasn't like the fourth prince was the one who chose his own name, yet Jing Shao was blaming him for it anyway.

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QIN ZHAORAN STOOD in front of the Prince Cheng Estate looking at its grand, imposing entrance, far more magnificent than the Beiwei Estate he'd frequented in his youth. The plaque above the gate bore six large characters: *Prince Cheng and Marquis Wenyuan Estate.* It looked rather peculiar, but it was precisely because it was so awkward that a certain intimacy seemed to permeate its wording; an intimacy kept unspoken beyond its gates.

Master Yun, who'd just stepped out on an errand, saw the young man woolgathering in front of the gates. Noticing his refined demeanor, Master Yun thought he must be a visitor, so he called out to inquire as to his purpose.

"Sir, do you need something?"

Qin Zhaoran was going to say it was nothing, but after a moment to think, he couldn't help but ask, "My name is Qin Zhaoran, an old friend of Marquis Wenyuan. May I ask if His Lordship is at home at the moment?"

"His Lordship and His Highness left the house together and won't be returning until after noon. If you are not in a hurry, sir, you may come in and wait for him," said Master Yun politely.

"There's no need for that." Qin Zhaoran waved off that idea, looked wistfully at the door plaque, then turned and left.

When the two returned from The Flavor of Nostalgia, Master Yun recounted the visit from the Primus Scholar. Mulling it over, Jing Shao figured that since this Qin Zhaoran was a fellow student of his consort, now that he'd achieved the title of Primus Scholar, Jing Shao really ought to at least buy him dinner. And so, he asked Master Yun to send an invitation for him to come over to their estate tomorrow.

"He's going to refuse," said Mu Hanzhang, glancing at the invitation. That man was a principled scholar down to his bones and as such held princes and nobles in contempt.

"He's your old classmate—and sort of a relative too. Whether he comes or not after we send the invitation is his business," said Jing Shao, seemingly unconcerned.

When the invitation landed in the new Primus Scholar’s hands, after great hesitation, Qin Zhaoran ultimately decided to decline.

The servant returned and said that the Primus Scholar considered his own humble status and did not wish to impose upon His Highness and His Lordship but had instructed the servant to bring back an inkstone for Mu Hanzhang.

“This man is rather cautious,” said Jing Shao to his consort after listening to the servant’s reply.

With furrowed brows, Mu Hanzhang looked down at the gift in his hands. It was made from a type of stone harvested in Qin Zhaoran’s hometown, but it was seldom available for sale because grinding ink sticks on it produced a lower quality ink full of impurities, and it crumbled easily, making it hard to carve.

When they were young, Qin Zhaoran had told him that since his family was poor and they couldn’t afford to give him a good inkstone, he’d search for this stone in the river himself. After all, one could grind a stick of ink over any hollow or crevice to easily make ink. Since the minerals of the stone he used mixed into the ink, the writing produced would always be tinged with indigo. Mu Hanzhang had been quite curious at the time and really wanted to see such an inkstone; he’d never imagined that after all these years, Qin Zhaoran would still remember.

“Tensions are high at the moment, so it’s just as well that he didn’t come.” Mu Hanzhang set the inkstone aside. “Brother asking for the Tertius Flower has already drawn enough attention. It’s best we don’t associate too closely with the rest of them.”

Jing Shao nodded and bade the servant to bring back a return gift for Qin Zhaoran. Then, considering that this was an old friend of his consort, he asked Xiao Yuan not to send him off to some remote, impoverished village and to at least find him a post in a region rich in resources where it would be easier to achieve political accomplishments.

After Qin Zhaoran left the capital to take up his post, Mu Hanzhang didn’t see him again, and Jing Shao also completely forgot about the matter for the moment. In the middle of the Third Month, Jing Chen was set to leave for Jiangnan, and the couple was too busy to worry about anything else.

Before Jing Chen departed, he entrusted part of his network to Mu Hanzhang so that he could manage the more urgent affairs in the capital while he was gone. He also entrusted him with the oversight of Tertius Flower Ma Zhuo, asking him to provide guidance if needed.

“Brother trusts you far more than he trusts me nowadays,” said Jing Shao jealously, snuggling up to his consort.

As Mu Hanzhang annotated the document in his hand, he patted the big head leaning on his shoulder. “You always bolt as soon as you see any paperwork. Brother gave up on you ages ago.”

Ever since Mu Hanzhang started being allowed to attend court, Jing Chen often called him over to the Prince Rui Estate to participate in various meetings and had gradually handed over parts of his work for Mu Hanzhang to manage, as if he’d transferred many of his expectations for his younger brother onto this younger-brother-in-law. This meant that even after he’d left the capital, Mu Hanzhang could still manage the work without much hassle.

Jing Shao whined and grumbled, unwilling to get off Mu Hanzhang’s shoulder. Li’l Sunbeam slipped in through the crack in the door and grabbed the table leg to try to see what was on top of it. On the table was a plate of fresh mulberries, bright red and tinged with just a hint of purple, when they tasted best.

“What’s the deal with that Ma Zhuo? I get this feeling that he and Brother are old acquaintances.” Mu Hanzhang tapped the furry paw reaching for the plate with the end of his brush.

“Um… I’m not sure either, but he’s hinted at it before. It seems like he’s from the Zhuo clan.” Jing Shao picked up an unripe mulberry and stuffed it into the cub’s mouth, the sourness making him shake his head almost immediately. “Ma Zhuo’s surname isn’t actually Ma but Zhuo.”

Mu Hanzhang stopped writing and turned to him. He’d taken the imperial exams with a false name? There must have been some unspeakable secret behind it all.

“I was still little when the Zhuo clan fell, so I’m not too sure what happened, but my guess is that Brother might have had some correspondence with them over the years,” Jing Shao said quietly.

“Otherwise, how could Tertius Flower Ma manage to forge an identity in the household registration system to take the exam?”

He’d paid little attention to matters of the imperial court in his previous life, so he wasn’t familiar with the people around Jing Chen either.

Although Mu Hanzhang had been quite young at the time, he still remembered how explosive the news was when Minister Zhuo had been convicted, his properties seized, and his entire family exiled. He’d also heard his father talk about it, so he nodded slightly as he heard this from Jing Shao, thinking it best to discuss it as little as possible.

“That Ma Zhuo really is a marvel, though. It took him mere days to get to know everyone well at the Ministry of Rites, and even the older officials are all smiles whenever they see him.” Mu Hanzhang picked up a mulberry for himself, but Jing Shao ate it directly out of his hand before he could bring it to his own mouth.

“These mulberries are tangy and really tasty. Let’s send some over for Mother,” said Jing Shao. As he ate the mulberry, he took the chance to lick those slender and lustrous fingers, only happily letting him go once he felt them tremble in response.

“I already sent some.” Mu Hanzhang was rather resigned to Jing Shao’s increasingly childish behavior. These mulberries were grown right here in the estate, and now that Lady Qiu was pregnant, she craved these sweet-and-sour things the most. “I sent some over to the Prince Rui Estate as well. I heard Sister-in-Law hasn’t been well lately, so we should go see her tomorrow.”

“Mm-hmm,” hummed Jing Shao in response. Not long after this, a servant arrived to announce that Lord Ma of the Ministry of Rites was here for a visit.

Chapter 84:
Tertius Flower

JING SHAO TOLD DUOFU to take him straight to the tea room at Zephyr Pavilion, then helped his consort tidy up everything on the desk before they headed over.

Ma Zhuo was in the tea room, but he wasn't sitting down. He simply stood there as was proper, and when he saw the two of them arrive, he immediately stepped forward to pay his respects. "Greetings, Your Highness. Greetings, Your Lordship."

"Lord Ma, please rise. Why didn't you have a seat?" Jing Shao had a rather good impression of this Tertius Flower, and at any rate, after Jing Chen requested for him to join the Ministry of Rites after his performance at the Banquet of the Laureates, they were clearly already on the same side, so naturally his attitude toward him was warmer.

"Your Highness and Your Lordship hadn't arrived yet, so how could this one simply sit down?" Ma Zhuo had smiling eyes, even when he wasn't actually smiling, so now that he really did have a smile on his face, he looked especially endearing.

"Is there something you need, Lord Ma?" Mu Hanzhang smiled and invited him to sit down.

"Oh, so, this is what happened—I ran into a hunter peddling his goods in the south side of the city today and noticed that apart from hides and live animals, he also had a basket of grass for sale. So, I went and asked him about it, and that's when I found out that this is fresh tiger grass, collected from the mountains. The hunter thought that since tigers often ate it, it must be an herbal medicine, so he picked some to sell. But after hours of trying to hawk it, all he got was a bunch of people laughing at him." Ma Zhuo's voice was clear and bright, and as he spoke, his tones rose and fell like those of a storyteller. It was impossible to feel annoyed by his long tale—one felt compelled to keep listening.

As he told his story, he produced a weathered bamboo basket filled with fresh blades of grass out from behind the chair, apparently verifying what he'd just said. Right at that moment, Miaoxi walked in with a pot of tea to refill his teacup.

Ma Zhuo seemed a little embarrassed. "This is the young lady who poured tea for me earlier. I was worried that she'd laugh at me, so I hid the basket behind the chair."

Miaoxi couldn't help but laugh at this; she seemed to want to say something, but remembering the rules that Mu Hanzhang always emphasized, she quickly refilled the tea before running out with a smile.

Jing Shao observed Ma Zhuo's every move impassively. Just as his consort said, he was eloquent and quick on the uptake. He took the proffered basket and glanced inside. "What's this tiger grass used for?"

"This one grew up in the mountains and knows that aside from meat, tigers also eat a special kind of grass, and if they were to go without it for a long time, they'd get sick," said Ma Zhuo, still speaking evenly as though telling a story. "This one heard that a tiger is being kept here and thus took the opportunity to bring it over for Your Highness and Your Lordship."

Mu Hanzhang picked up a blade of grass and examined it. He'd actually read about this tiger grass from a book before but had assumed it was just folklore, never believing it actually existed. However, as Ma Zhuo had said, the hunter wouldn't be able to sell such herbs for very much, so he'd probably gotten them for a few coppers. It wasn't a valuable gift, but it was a thoughtful one; accepting it wouldn't cause any harm, but not accepting it would make it seem as though they were putting on airs. This Tertius Flower Ma certainly had a way with people.

"If that's the case, then thank you, Lord Ma." Mu Hanzhang took the basket from Jing Shao's hand and set it aside.

"There's no need to be so polite. While Prince Rui is away from the capital, this one has been quite a burden to Your Lordship. This can hardly compare to the help you have given me recently," Ma Zhuo said with a smile.

The three of them chatted idly for a while, then Ma Zhuo stood up and said that it was time for him to return to the Ministry of Rites. Mu

Hanzhang tried to persuade him to stay for lunch, but he declined politely, citing a report he needed to hand in by High Noon.

Mu Hanzhang fiddled with the tiger grass in his hand. “Ma Zhuo has a real knack for this.”

But Jing Shao’s brow was furrowed, and he seemed to be in deep thought. Why did he find the way Ma Zhuo acted when Miaoxi came in so familiar?

When he noticed that Jing Shao wasn’t saying anything, Mu Hanzhang turned to him to ask, “What’s wrong?”

“I just keep thinking that I’ve seen him somewhere before.” There was visible confusion on Jing Shao’s face. It probably wasn’t someone he’d seen after his rebirth, because the impression was so distant and vague that if he hadn’t felt so familiar earlier, he wouldn’t have thought of it at all.

Mu Hanzhang thought for a moment and said, “He never entered the capital before the exams, so unless…” He lowered his voice then, planning to say the rest by Jing Shao’s ear.

As Jing Shao turned his head, he happened to meet his consort’s lips; they were just a hair’s breadth apart, so he decided to move a little closer and kiss him.

There was a *clang!* as Miaoxi stopped abruptly on her way in to refill the tea. She immediately steadied the teapot in her hand, then, practically holding her breath, turned and withdrew from the room.

Mu Hanzhang grunted and immediately pushed Jing Shao away, his handsome face turning a deep red. To get caught red-handed like this in broad daylight by a handmaiden; how was he supposed to show his face again?

“What are you afraid of? I’m no maiden with a reputation to ruin.” Jing Shao could tell that his consort was being shy again, so he pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms before he could get angry, catching one flushed ear with his teeth.

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare but then helplessly laughed. He quietly voiced his suspicions: Since Ma Zhuo was part of the Zhuo clan,

and they had not been to the capital for many years, Jing Shao could only have met him as a child.

"As a child…" Jing Shao thought about it for a moment. He'd grown up in the palace, so he couldn't have met all that many outsiders. If he specifically considered only members of the Zhuo clan, all he could think of was Jing Chen's study companion!

"His study companion?" Mu Hanzhang asked, slightly surprised.

Judging by Ma Zhuo's appearance, he didn't look like a twenty-five-year-old; he seemed to have only just reached the age of majority and looked even younger than the composed Qin Zhaoran.

Though they thought they'd figured out Ma Zhuo's identity, they weren't entirely sure, and it wasn't something they could rashly ask. The two decided to pretend not to know and to wait to ask Jing Chen when he got back.

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THE NEXT DAY, the two brought some gifts to visit Princely Consort Rui at the Prince Rui Estate.

She didn't look well, but it wasn't to the point of being bedridden, and she greeted the two of them in the main hall with a smile.

Princely Consort Rui's voice was a bit frail, and she seemed as if she really was sleep-deprived, with dark circles faintly visible under her eyes. "I caught a bit of a chill during my postpartum month and haven't been sleeping well over the past few days, which is why I'm experiencing some chest tightness and shortness of breath. It's nothing serious."

"Your health is important. If there's anything in the estate you need help with, just send word," said Mu Hanzhang gently.

In the past, when they were away from home, they would also ask Princely Consort Rui to help look after the harem on occasion.

At the sound of this, Princely Consort Rui slowly took a sip of tea and said, “I appreciate your kindness, but even though I am not very capable, I can still tend to the trivial matters of the harem.”

Jing Shao’s expression grew dark the moment he heard this. This sister-in-law hadn’t taken to him in his past life either, but he hadn’t particularly cared about that back then. But now, with how quickly she rejected Junqing’s kind offer of help, it really felt a bit insulting.

“It’s true—I’m not well-versed in the management of a harem anyway. Since you’re doing all right, we won’t stay and impose on you.” Mu Hanzhang smiled and put a hand over Jing Shao’s clenched fist. “It’s getting late, so we ought to head back.”

Just then, a baby not too far away started to cry, and a trace of melancholy surfaced on Princely Consort Rui’s face.

She rose from her seat to see them off. “I ought to ask you to stay for lunch, but His Highness isn’t present, and there are so many young children here at the moment.”

“You better go check on him. There’s no need to see us out.” Mu Hanzhang offered some words of courtesy, then left the Prince Rui Estate with his hand in Jing Shao’s.

Outside, Jing Shao’s fists were still tightly clenched. “Outrageous!”

“They say that poor postpartum recovery can make a woman short-tempered. Don’t take what she says to heart.” Mu Hanzhang rocked their linked hands and tried to console him.

After all, once Jing Chen ascended the throne, Princely Consort Rui would become the empress. Even if her words were a bit harsh, there was no need to get on her bad side over something so trivial.

“Whenever she talks to me, it always seems like she’s trying to imply something. Even though I find it grating, I’ve never taken it up with her. But today, she was obviously trying to embarrass you—” Jing Shao only got halfway through the sentence before a slender finger was placed before his lips.

“There’s no point in taking the words of a woman of the harem seriously,” said Mu Hanzhang. He wasn’t at all bothered, honestly. Ever

since he was little, he'd heard no shortage of wounding remarks, and truthfully, Princely Consort Rui hadn't said anything out of line.

Jing Shao held the reins with one hand and tightened his other arm around Mu Hanzhang. He didn't care what happened to himself, but he couldn't bear to watch this man being slighted in such a manner.

What Mu Hanzhang was actually thinking about was how Princely Consort Rui had looked. In a few months, once Mother had given birth, he needed to find someone to take good care of her so that she wouldn't end up with any lingering health issues.

The whole of the Third Month was quite busy, so the two didn't make a visit to the Prince Rui Estate again.

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IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, it was the middle of the Fourth Month, and Jing Chen had finally returned from Jiangnan. The first thing he did after coming out of the palace was go to the Prince Cheng Estate.

The trip to Jiangnan went fairly smoothly, but when King Huainan was brought up, a rare, strange look came over Jing Chen's face. After falling silent for a long while, all he had to say was "That man is deeply calculating" and nothing further.

Jing Shao was rather curious—Gu Huaiqing had a mind like inclement weather, so he really wanted to know how things had gone when he was faced with his quiet, reserved elder brother. He wanted to ask for more details, but Mu Hanzhang quietly kicked him under the table, so he changed the subject and asked about Ma Zhuo instead.

Chapter 85:
A Familiar Face

JING CHEN CONFIRMED Ma Zhuo's identity right away: He was indeed Jing Chen's childhood study companion. When the Zhuo clan had fallen into disgrace, Ma Zhuo had been exiled along with the rest of his family, but thanks to Jing Chen's intercession, he was the only one permitted to stay behind in the capital. However, considering that his family now consisted entirely of women, children, and the aged and infirm, they needed a boy like him to take care of them. And so he declined the prince's kindness and followed them into exile.

Once Mu Hanzhang had confirmed Ma Zhuo's identity, his perception of him instantly elevated. Jing Chen's study companion in his youth had been none other than Minister Zhuo's legitimate eldest son, Zhuo Yunji. It was rumored that he possessed exceptional intelligence and could recall texts verbatim after reading them only once. Before the fall of the Zhuo clan, the headmaster at the Mu clan school often brought him up.

"He's nowhere near as impressive as the rumors say," said Jing Chen, shaking his head wearily.

Ma Zhuo merely had a silver tongue that amused the teacher, which was why he often praised him in front of other people. The headmaster at the Mu clan had been taught by the same teacher when he'd studied at the Imperial Academy, so he was likely to exaggerate his own mentor's words.

"Yeah, that's right! There's no way he memorized everything by reading it once!" Jing Shao chimed in.

When they were little, he'd personally observed Zhuo Yunji copying pages he was supposed to memorize onto his hand, and Jing Shao had even caught him red-handed once. That guy had only managed to convince Jing Shao not to tell anyone by giving him a handful of candy.

Mu Hanzhang smiled knowingly, then changed the subject to recent events at court assembly. "The first prince has requested to return to court, and his memorial is still on the way."

It was only after managing some affairs for Jing Chen while he was away that Mu Hanzhang had realized just how powerful the second prince truly was.

Jing Chen took a sip of tea and turned to Jing Shao. “What do you think?”

Jing Shao’s brows drew slightly together. The Southern Barbarians’ rebellion hadn’t even been quelled yet, and that coward Jing Rong was already running back with his tail between his legs. If they didn’t manipulate things properly, Jing Shao would end up having to handle it.

“If he has no shame, then it’s out of our hands—it’s not like we can stop him. But as for Yunnan-Tibet, Father’s definitely not just going to let that go… Anyway, I’m not going.”

“No one is asking you to go,” Jing Chen said, shooting him a glare. He then asked for Mu Hanzhang’s opinion.

“We can send someone else.” Mu Hanzhang ran a finger slowly back and forth along the rim of his cup. Since the first prince was asking to come back of his own volition, they couldn’t simply intercept the memorial. It all depended on His Majesty’s wishes.

Jing Chen did have an idea, but he still wanted to hear what the other two thought. “Who?”

“Earl Yongchang is the best candidate. He might even get a marquisate out of it,” Jing Shao jeered. Hadn’t Countess Yongchang been all riled up about Princely Consort Cheng being made a marquis? Now her husband could have a chance to chase glory and earn his own marquisate on the battlefield.

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SEVERAL DAYS LATER, First Prince Jing Rong’s memorial seeking permission to return to the capital landed on Emperor Hongzheng’s desk.

“Worthless!” Emperor Hongzheng flung the memorial to the floor in front of the whole court.

“Your Majesty, the Southern Barbarians are riding high on success, and if we suddenly withdraw our troops, it may only serve to embolden them, making them tougher to deal with in the future,” said the minister of war worriedly.

After the old prime minister’s passing, Emperor Hongzheng hadn’t yet appointed another. He had instead distributed the prime minister’s duties among the six ministries. For ministries led by princes or nobles, those duties fell to people with peerages, and if there were no nobles in a ministry, the work had been handed over to its minister. As a result, the words of the ministers of the six ministries currently held considerable weight.

Sure enough, once Minister Sun had spoken up, many people immediately voiced their agreement.

“Father!” Fourth Prince Jing Yu suddenly stepped forward and bowed. “Your son has heard that First Brother contracted miasmic sickness in Yunnan-Tibet and has been ill for over a month. Now that the weather is getting warmer, the number of venomous snakes and insects are only going to increase, which is extremely detrimental to his health. Since he would willingly forgo this chance at glory, it must mean his body is truly at its limit!”

The fourth prince spoke in an impassioned tone, as if he and his brother actually shared a deep bond. Emperor Hongzheng was quite satisfied with Jing Yu’s display of protectiveness for his older brother, and the sharpness in his eyes softened just a tad.

Jing Chen studied the fourth prince, who was nearly in tears, his gaze darkening slightly. Back in Jiangnan, Gu Huaiqing had shown him the letters sent by Emperor Hongzheng, his intention to abolish the feudatory growing more obvious with each iteration. The performance put on by Jing Rong and Jing Yu was no doubt related to how His Majesty felt about Huainan. He couldn’t help but scoff at it privately—as soon as a desirable opportunity presented itself, they were quick to abandon the undesirable one; life certainly didn’t hand out favors like that!

Jing Shao covertly glanced at his consort. Mu Hanzhang signaled for him not to speak out of turn, so he lowered his head obediently and said nothing.

Emperor Hongzheng remained silent as he listened to his high-ranking officials argue back and forth. In conclusion, one side thought that the Southern Barbarians were nothing more than a roving band of ruffians unworthy of squandering too much time on, while the other side argued for the sake of the bigger picture and thought a prince fleeing the battlefield would damage the imperial court's reputation. At the words "fleeing the battlefield," Emperor Hongzheng's brows drew together again.

Only once the crowd was nearly done arguing did Jing Chen finally step forward. He slowly picked up the memorial that had been thrown down the steps and carefully read through its contents. He then lifted his hems and knelt.

"To report to Father, according to what this memorial contains, First Brother's health is indeed a cause for concern, so your son earnestly requests Father to graciously permit his return to the capital."

Jing Yu's eyes suddenly widened as though he was unable to comprehend what Jing Chen was saying, and he sped to figure out why Jing Chen would do this. And when he noticed the way Jing Shao was looking silently downward, he understood immediately. Prince Rui must have been trying to seize the opportunity to speak to recommend someone else to fill this vacancy, thus preventing Jing Shao from being sent to Yunnan-Tibet. A cold, mean smile surfaced on his face—how could he possibly let them have their way?

"To report to Your Majesty, while it is certainly possible for the first prince to return to the capital, the Southern Barbarians' rebellion has not yet been quelled. It is still necessary to appoint a commander skilled in military strategy to bring a swift end to the conflict," said Duke Mao, hurriedly stepping forward.

"Yes, Your Majesty, this one believes—" Earl Yongchang stepped forward to speak, but Marquis Beiwei cut him off.

"This one believes that Earl Yongchang is the most suitable candidate."

Earl Yongchang's eyes went wide in shock. He never would've expected the typically taciturn Marquis Beiwei to suddenly push him forward as a recommendation.

“This one’s rank and words lack the weight to sufficiently intimidate the Southern Barbarians,” added Earl Yongchang hastily.

Before the expedition had begun last year, the ministers of the court had already debated on this point and decided that it was best to send a prince to lead the campaign against the Southern Barbarians.

Hearing this, Emperor Hongzheng recalled how Countess Yongchang had made a scene in front of the empress dowager, and a wave of irritation washed over him.

He turned to his one remaining son, who was standing so rigidly that he seemed almost to blend into the coiled dragon pillar behind him. “Jing Shao, what do you think?”

Mu Hanzhang’s heart sank, and his hand, hidden beneath his purple cloud-patterned court attire, quietly clenched into a fist. Asking him this now meant that His Majesty was annoyed by this whole thing, and he wanted Jing Shao to quickly settle it.

“Your son believes that these small bands of Southern Barbarian raiders are not worth worrying about, and the best thing to do with them is to send someone who has no experience in leading troops so that they can gain some.”

Jing Shao was implying that the fight against these bandits was just a minor squabble, and even losing would be no great loss, so Emperor Hongzheng was free to send whomever he wanted for some training. He also made it clear that he didn’t want to go himself, since asking him to go would be like using an ox-cleaver to kill a chicken.

As soon as these words had left his mouth, the entire fourth prince faction turned pale; of all the princes present, the only one who’d never led an army was Jing Yu. And likewise, all the blood seemed to drain from Earl Yongchang’s face—the most likely outcome was for the rest to recommend him in order to protect Jing Yu.

Jing Shao often threw his weight around at court, so in response to such a blunt statement, all Emperor Hongzheng did was furrow his brow slightly, not bothering to reprimand him.

“Well, Earl Yongchang *has* never led troops before,” said Marquis Dingnan slowly, as if he’d only just realized it.

Marquis Dingnan was Jing Chen's father-in-law, and in order to avoid coming off as a collaborator, he rarely spoke at morning court. However, since Marquis Beiwei had already spoken today, there was no harm in his adding to it.

After that, the court overwhelmingly suggested that they send Earl Yongchang, and even a few officials from the fourth prince's faction voiced their agreement.

Emperor Hongzheng made the decision right then and there, ordering Earl Yongchang to depart for Yunnan-Tibet in three days. He then issued an edict summoning the first prince back to the capital.

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"YOUR MAJESTY, you must stop this from happening! Yunnan-Tibet is such a perilous place, and someone His Lordship's age can't possibly endure it!" cried Countess Yongchang in the Rite of Luan Palace.

"His Majesty has already issued an edict. What do you expect us to do?"

The empress consort was so angry that she smacked the table. Her younger brother was truly more of a liability than an asset, only ever good for making things worse. Every time she asked him to do anything, he was never able to get it done properly, and this time, he'd even managed to get himself personally mixed up in things.

"But Your Majesty, he's your brother! You can't just let him die!" Countess Yongchang started to weep pitifully into a handkerchief she was holding.

When it came down to it, he *was* her brother, and Jing Yu still needed the influence and connections his uncle's family could offer.

Once the empress consort had her fill of yelling, she immediately softened her tone and said, "Tell him to set his mind at ease and bide his time in Yunnan-Tibet for a while. Isn't the Commander of the Eastern

Campaign still there? Tell him to try not to stand out, and in a while, we will get someone to take his place."

Fourth Prince Jing Yu had already said the same thing to Earl Yongchang. The most important thing right now was to bring back the first prince. Even though his first brother wasn't really united with him in purpose, at least he could serve as a helping hand. Eventually, once war with Huainan began, Jing Rong could keep an eye on Jing Chen and Jing Shao for him, something his uncle couldn't help him with.

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AFTER MORNING COURT had been dismissed, Jing Shao sprang over to his consort's side. "I think I just saw Jing Yu's face turn green."

"Mm-hmm," Mu Hanzhang hummed in return as he continued walking forward.

Unhappy with his response, Jing Shao hurried in front of him, walking backward and watching Mu Hanzhang's face. "I was on the ball today, wasn't I?"

Mu Hanzhang shot him a look. Even after a whole year together, Jing Shao still didn't know how to make a "praise me" expression, and at times like these, all he ever did was stare intently. When he remembered the look on Jing Shao's face as he handed him a pair of underpants on the day after their wedding, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but smile.

Due to his constant good mood and all the supplementary soups and decoctions Jing Shao had tried to feed him every day this past year, his handsome face had grown even more beautiful than it had ever been before. In the bright sunlight of early summer, his smile was truly indescribably captivating.

Jing Shao was so entranced that he fell into a daze, and as he reached out to touch it, he suddenly fell backward with a shout into a cart full of leafy green vegetables.

Mu Hanzhang had seen the cabbage cart coming up and had been just about to remind him to watch his step when Jing Shao toppled right into it. Jing Shao struggled up out of the cart, a leaf stuck to his head. The sight was so funny that Mu Hanzhang laughed out loud.

A sour look immediately came over the face of the old man pushing the cart, but when he saw the finery the two were dressed in, he didn't dare say anything. He could only look down at his cartload of crushed vegetables, plainly distressed.

Jing Shao leaped to his feet angrily, piles of squashed vegetable leaves raining off his back. He stared down with puffed cheeks at his consort, who was still laughing helplessly.

Seeing Jing Shao get worked up, Mu Hanzhang stuffed a few silver bits into the old man's hand and told him to leave at once. Then, he walked over to Jing Shao and took the leaf off his head, stifling his laughter all the while as he brushed the wrinkles out of Jing Shao's court attire.

"You were very valiant at morning court today. Quite nearly scared Earl Yongchang half to death."

At this praise, Jing Shao broke into a grin. "That's right!"

His humiliation from falling into a vegetable cart vanished, and he happily followed his consort back home.

Just as they got to the gates of the estate, they ran into Hao Dadao.

"Your Highness. Master Jun!"

Although Hao Dadao had been made a general, he wasn't required to attend court regularly, nor was he one to give gifts to maintain social connections, so it had been months since he'd gotten to see these two.

"General Hao, what a rare guest. Please, come inside." Mu Hanzhang smiled. People he'd met on the battlefield always felt much closer than those he met in the capital.

"Oh, that's okay," said Hao Dadao, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Here's the thing—my wife just arrived in the capital yesterday, and she's already cooked a table full of food. She wanted to invite you two over for dinner as a token of our gratitude."

“Missus Hao is here in the capital? That’s wonderful!” Jing Shao exclaimed with a smile. Judging by the uneasy expression on Hao Dadao’s face, that wife of his must have insisted on having them over for dinner.

She’d arrived out of the blue, and Hao Dadao was so intimidated by her that he could only grit his teeth and come here personally to wait by their door until they returned from morning court.

“It must have been quite a trip for her. We have to come over for dinner,” said Mu Hanzhang, smiling gently. “General, please head home and let her know we’ll be over shortly. We’ll join you after we’ve changed.”

Hao Dadao gave a genuine and kind smile at his words, and with a nod, he went back to report to his wife.

Mu Hanzhang had a very good impression of the straightforward Missus Hao. In consideration of her help in washing the tiger cub, he asked Duofu to prepare a generous gift. Then, after he and Jing Shao had changed into regular clothes, they headed to the General Hao Manor.

General Hao Manor wasn’t far from the Prince Cheng Estate, and even though it was nowhere near as extravagant as a prince’s estate, it was certainly regal and stately compared to a common man’s home.

As soon as the two entered through the front gates, they heard Missus Hao’s vigorous shout: “Hurry up; His Highness and the princely consort will be here soon. Move quickly!”

The two exchanged a look and smiled. This woman really didn’t know how to relax, no matter where she went.

They had just followed a servant to the door when they heard a bright, pleasant voice. “Ma’am, why don’t you rest for a while? Their Highnesses will be here soon, so shouldn’t you go inside and freshen up a bit?”

Jing Shao couldn’t help but pause and turn to his consort. Seeing that Mu Hanzhang seemed just as surprised as he was, he quickened the pace and stepped over the threshold.

Inside the room, a large pearwood table was laden with various dishes. Missus Hao nimbly placed the dishes she’d personally stir-fried onto the table, Hao Dadao was sent off to fetch a bottle of treasured wine out of

storage, and the servants bustled around busily. Only one person there had nothing to do, and he sat idly at the table with a cup of tea in his hand, watching the two visitors with a faint smile.

Chapter 86:
Chaos

CLAD IN ROBES as white as snow, with features as pretty as a painting—who else could it be but Gu Huaiqing?

“Your Highness! Your Lordship!” Missus Hao saw them come in and hurried over to pay her respects. She’d clearly just learned how to perform such etiquette, and she looked extremely awkward.

Mu Hanzhang greeted her with a smile. “Missus Hao, how have you been?”

Jing Shao, however, was having a staring contest with Gu Huaiqing, absolutely certain that it was indeed King Huainan himself. He was trying to ask, with a meaningful glance, what he was doing here.

Gu Huaiqing acted as though he had no idea what Jing Shao was trying to convey and got up to bow at the pair. “Greetings, Your Highness, Your Lordship.”

“I met this Mister Gu on my way here,” said Missus Hao, warmly introducing him. “My mule went lame halfway to the capital, but thankfully I ran into Mister Gu, and he was kind enough to give me a ride. Mister Gu is an official too. He’s here on business but has no place to stay, so I took the liberty of letting him stay with us.”

Gu Huaiqing cast a grateful glance at Missus Hao. “My name is Gu Qing, magistrate of Huaiyang County in Jiangnan, and I’ve come to the capital to present an official governance report. Fortunately, General Hao has not turned me away and is allowing me to stay for a couple of days.”

His manner was humble, and his story seemed perfectly cogent. If it weren’t for the fact that no two copies of his peerlessly beautiful face could exist, Jing Shao might have really been convinced that he had the wrong person.

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips to stifle a laugh. Huaiyang County was what that area used to be called in the previous dynasty; it had since been

renamed to Danyang, and Danyang was the main city of the Huainan fiefdom. So where would one find a Huaiyang magistrate?

When Missus Hao noticed that His Highness did not seem to blame her for the presence of a stranger, she warmly invited them to take their seats and left for the kitchens herself, planning to cook a couple more dishes.

Hao Dadao's manor was sparsely staffed by servants, and the more presentable ones had been sent away to do chores. Once Missus Hao was gone, that left the three people in the room to gape at each other.

"What are you doing here?" Jing Shao said, lowering his voice.

"I just happened to run into her on the road," said Gu Huaiqing innocently.

Veins throbbed in Jing Shao's temples. A vassal king wasn't allowed in the capital without an official summons; it wasn't something that could be easily brushed off if anyone spotted him. How could he still be in the mood to joke around at a time like this?!

Mu Hanzhang laid his hand over Jing Shao's fist, which looked like it might fly uncontrolled at Gu Huaiqing's face at any moment, and he patted it soothingly.

He said softly, "Brother, did you come to the capital because there's something urgent you must do?"

The question left Gu Huaiqing no choice but to answer. He smiled, put down his teacup, and pretended to sigh with longing. "There is this beauty. One glimpse and he is etched in my soul; a single day without him, and I am lost in longing."[1]

"What does that mean?" Jing Shao frowned. That was the one problem with this guy—the more anxious you were, the less likely he was to speak without going in circles. He'd speak in riddles until your blood started to boil in your veins.

Mu Hanzhang, however, looked at Gu Huaiqing in surprise. "Brother, you must be joking."

Gu Huaiqing immediately tucked away his look of melancholy, and a dash of mischief curled up at the corner of his lips.

“Junqing, are you doubting my sincerity?” Then he made to grab the hand Junqing had placed over Jing Shao’s.

Predictably, he was met with Jing Shao’s fist. “Brother, one must not covet a friend’s wife,” Jing Shao said, even though his fist was already sailing toward the corner of one upward-slanting eye.

Gu Huaiqing knew that fist was coming, so he deftly reached out to take hold of it. As he grabbed Jing Shao’s hand, he slipped a small object into it. With a twist of his arm, he grabbed Jing Shao’s arm and pulled him closer to say by his ear, “Do return that for me.”

Jing Shao squeezed the small object in his palm and nodded slightly. When he let go, he turned his right arm suddenly and struck Gu Huaiqing in the chest and elbow.

Caught off guard, Gu Huaiqing almost got knocked backward off his chair. He clutched his chest and coughed for a good while before he managed to say, “Assaulting a government official… What a disgrace!”

Hearing those words sent a shudder through Jing Shao, and he angrily punched him again. “Stop talking like my brother!”

Hao Dadao came in carrying a jar of wine, returning to the three of them sitting quietly in their seats. They weren’t speaking, and Gu Huaiqing was slowly rubbing at his chest with one hand.

“Are you quite all right?” Hao Dadao had a rather good impression of Gu Huaiqing, who had been kind enough to offer his wife a ride to the capital.

Gu Huaiqing gave a weak smile that really did make him look the part of a frail scholar. “I’ve had a heart condition since I was a child, but it’s nothing serious.”

Hao Dadao frowned at this. “Then you really should see a doctor about it.” He immediately turned as though he was off to get a doctor.

“Oh, there’s no need for that.” Gu Huaiqing hastened to intercept the cordial, principled General Hao. “I was just too happy to be able to meet Their Highnesses, that’s all, and it was so sudden that I could barely contain myself.”

As Jing Shao listened to this, the vein in his temple only throbbed more, making him want to throw another punch at him.

The dishes provided by Missus Hao were all simple home-cooked fare, and most of them were personally prepared by her. Naturally, her skills were far inferior to those of the cooks at a prince's estate, but such humble food was something the three of them rarely ate, so it ended up tasting novel and interesting. Even Mu Hanzhang couldn't help eating an extra half bowl of rice.

"Madam Hao is such a good cook. You're so lucky, General Hao," said Mu Hanzhang with a smile, holding his postmeal tea.

"You haven't lost your way with words, I see." Missus Hao smiled so hard her eyes turned into slits. "He doesn't think he's so lucky, though—he's always complaining that my cooking's no good."

His wife's critique made Hao Dadao a little uncomfortable, so he changed the subject and said to Jing Shao, "Your Highness, this one acquired something the other day and would like you to see it."

Jing Shao shot him a look and said, "Sure." He immediately got up and asked his consort to wait here before leaving the dining hall with Hao Dadao.

When they reached the corner of the winding corridor, Jing Shao stopped, gaze sweeping over the flowers and plants in the garden. "What did you want to tell me?"

The General Hao Manor had just been built recently, so there weren't that many plants. Hao Dadao knew nothing about rare plants, so he'd planted a few dwarf elms in the garden. These had since sprouted, and the short little trees were covered in tender green leaves.

Hao Dadao said quietly, "That Master Gu, he says he knows Your Highness, but he also says that his visit to the capital cannot be made public. It was no place to tell you outside your estate, so I didn't report it at the time. I hope Your Highness will see fit to forgive me." Gu Huaiqing had told this to him alone; even his wife didn't know.

"He's right." Jing Shao turned to Hao Dadao and said, "Let him stay at your place for now. Just say he's a distant relative of your wife's family. I'll make sure he leaves in a couple of days."

Gu Huaiqing had always been cautious; back in Jiangnan, not a single one of Jing Shao's subordinates had ever met him, including Hao Dadao. But how he managed to fool Hao Dadao into believing him was the real mystery.

"He had a couple of bodyguards with him too, but because he wanted to see Your Highness, I didn't let them into the front court." So saying, Hao Dadao then reported everything that Gu Huaiqing had said and done.

Jing Shao nodded, patted his shoulder, and offered some praise. Hao Dadao had always been much more reliable than Zhao Meng when it came to getting things done, so nothing was likely to go amiss if he let Gu Huaiqing stay here.

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ON THEIR WAY BACK to the estate, Jing Shao took out the item Gu Huaiqing had stuffed into his hand earlier.

"What is it?" Mu Hanzhang picked up the item in his palm. It was a clasp made of green jade, exquisitely carved, cool to the touch, and tied with a red silk ribbon.

"He shoved it in my hand when we were fighting earlier and told me to return it for him." On this matter, Jing Shao was quite confounded—it wasn't like Gu Huaiqing said whom to return it to.

A strange expression came over Mu Hanzhang's face. He leaned back against Jing Shao and lifted the accessory up to daylight to examine it carefully.

"A jade clasp as high-grade as this can only be worn by someone of superior rank, such as a prince or a noble like a duke or a marquis."

Jing Shao wrapped his arm slowly around Mu Hanzhang's waist, his other occupied with the reins. "Then it's probably Brother's."

"But…" Mu Hanzhang felt as if he'd discovered some sort of secret.

“What’s wrong?” Jing Shao’s response seemed unconcerned, as he was busy enjoying the sensation of a warm, fragrant body using him as a backrest, a smile curling at his lips.

Mu Hanzhang frowned and turned to look at him. “Given its shape, this is likely something that’s inlaid in a belt…” How did a jade clasp attached to a belt end up in someone else’s hands?

After that, full of burning questions, the two turned the horse around and went straight to the Prince Rui Estate.

Jing Chen hadn’t yet had his afternoon nap, and he was cooling off in the courtyard reading a book. When he heard the pair was coming, instead of heading in to greet them, he simply asked the servants to bring a couple more stools.

“What are you doing here at this time of day?” Jing Chen asked, frowning. It had been getting hotter since the beginning of the Fifth Month, so for the two of them to come over so early in the afternoon meant they had something urgent to discuss.

“Gu Huaiqing is in the capital,” Jing Shao said, keeping his voice low.

Jing Chen sat up straight. “What is he doing here?”

Tensions were high at the moment; coming to the capital at a time like this, was he trying to hand the imperial court ammunition to use against him?

“I don’t know either.” Jing Shao scratched his head. “Nine out of ten things he says are lies, so even after talking over lunch I didn’t manage to get anything cogent out of him. He only told me to return this for him. Is this yours, Brother?”

When he saw the jade clasp Jing Shao handed to him, Jing Chen’s expression immediately closed up.

He rubbed at his throbbing temple. “Tell him to get out of the capital as soon as possible. There are too many people and too many pairs of eyes. Someone might recognize him.”

As they chatted, Princely Consort Rui came over with some tea on a tray. “It’s hot today, so I’ve made some cooling herbal tea. Please try it.”

“Thank you.” Mu Hanzhang accepted it with a smile, but Jing Shao didn’t look too pleased. He only took it after his consort nudged him with an elbow.

Princely Consort Rui was still quite pale, but judging by the color in her cheeks, she seemed to have improved compared to the time when Jing Chen had been absent from the capital.

“Have you felt any better lately?” Mu Hanzhang asked, as he took a sip of tea.

“Thanks to Your Lordship’s blessing, I’ve been much better lately,” Lady Xiao said politely.

“Sister-in-Law, I am hardly worthy of that,” said Mu Hanzhang, the smile at the corner of his lips fading as he glanced downward and took another sip. He’d been going to compliment her tea, but after this exchange, he couldn’t bring himself to say it anymore.

Jing Chen glanced at her. “Don’t come out if you’re feeling unwell. Go back inside and get some rest.”

Before Princely Consort Rui could respond, a servant from the front court hurried in to report that a pageboy from the Prince Cheng Estate was here with urgent news.

It was Yun Song, sweating profusely from running all the way. He bowed quickly, then said, “Someone from the Beiwei Estate came by to let you know that Madam Qiu had some fetal distress.”

Mu Hanzhang sprang to his feet. “What happened?”

“I don’t have the details—they only said that an imperial physician has already been summoned.” Knowing that this was important, Yun Song had gone to the General Hao Manor first before tracking them down here.

“Junqing, don’t panic.” Jing Shao held his hand and looked back at his older brother.

Jing Chen got up as well and, before Jing Shao could say anything, urged them to go. “You should hurry. I’ll send along another imperial physician.”

Looking at the pair as they rushed off, Jing Chen waved over one of his subordinates and said, “Go to the Academy of Medicine and ask Doctor

Zhang to make a visit to the Beiwei Estate."

His subordinate left with his orders. Lady Xiao took one look at the expression on Jing Chen's face before she said, "I heard that Marquis Beiwei's secondary wife is already seven months pregnant, so she'll likely be fine."

Jing Chen nodded and then glanced at her. "When I was away, did Jing Shao come by?"

"He did come by once, but we barely spoke before he left again," said Lady Xiao, downplaying the visit.

Jing Chen's brows drew together at her words, and he looked at her thoughtfully. "Is there something about Hanzhang that displeases you?"

"Whatever could you mean by that, Your Highness? How could I feel displeased by my brother-in-law in the slightest?" Princely Consort Rui asked in confusion.

Jing Chen fixed his profound gaze upon her for a time. "If you don't want to give Xiao-Si to Jing Shao, so be it, but why do you go out of your way to embarrass them?"

Lady Xiao felt terribly put out by these words; her youngest had been born to her after a difficult labor, and they'd both suffered a lot to survive the ordeal. How could she bear to give him up to be adopted by someone else? Ever since Jing Chen mentioned that to her, she found herself unable to put on a pleasant face every single time she saw the couple.

"Your Highness, it's not that I don't want to, but Xiao-Si is doing so poorly. If we give him up to a couple of men, how could they possibly take proper care of him? Besides, the reason Father wanted Prince Cheng to take a man as his consort in the first place was because—"

"Shut your mouth!" Jing Chen rebuked her at once, not allowing her to finish the rest of her sentence.

Things were not peaceful in the Prince Rui Estate, and over at the Beiwei Estate, it was even more of a mess.

With his consort in tow, Jing Shao had Shadow gallop all the way through the second gate into the Beiwei Estate's inner court, giving the porters quite a fright. They rushed to Lady Qiu's little courtyard home.

The imperial physician was inside treating her, but Marquise Beiwei was standing outside the door with a grim expression, several handmaidens behind her trembling with fear and barely daring to breathe. Only Lady Qiu's two handmaidens were busying themselves bringing hot water and fetching towels.

Sensing that something was wrong, Mu Hanzhang hurried into the inner chamber after greeting Lady Du. Jing Shao could not enter the inner chamber without being invited, but he did not leave either and chose to sit in the main seat in the outer chamber instead.

When Marquise Beiwei saw that Prince Cheng had come all the way into the harem and looked as if he had no intention of leaving, her expression grew even more severe, but all she could do was to have the servants bring him tea.

She sat herself down in a lower-ranking seat; it was going to be uncomfortable whether she chose to leave or stay.

Chapter 87:
Nightmare Psychosis

WHEN MU HANZHANG entered the inner chamber, the imperial physician was just taking his mother's pulse. Marquis Beiwei sat on a stool by the headboard, while Ge Ruoyi stood at the side of the bed attending to her.

After checking her pulse and pondering in silence for a moment, the imperial physician said, "There's some instability about the position of the fetus, but there's no sign of a miscarriage."

Mu Hanzhang walked closer. Lady Qiu was lying on the bed, her face a little pale, with a fine layer of sweat beading on her forehead. He sat down next to the bed and took the proffered handkerchief from Ge Ruoyi to wipe the sweat off her brow. "Mother, do you still feel unwell?"

"I'm feeling better." Lady Qiu sounded a bit frail, but her enunciation was clear and her palm was warm, so she was likely fine for the time being.

Mu Hanzhang turned to ask the imperial physician, "How did she end up with fetal distress all of a sudden?"

Doctor Jiang was the one who prescribed the medicine for stabilizing the pregnancy, Ge Ruoyi was the one who decocted the mixture herself, and there was even more care taken with her food. Back in the Third Month, Lady Qiu had a terrible bout of morning sickness, so Mu Hanzhang had specifically transferred one of the estate's cooks to the small kitchen in Lady Qiu's courtyard home to prepare her meals exclusively.

This imperial physician had only just been summoned here by Marquis Beiwei for this, so he wasn't quite sure what had happened either.

"Madam Qiu merely had a fright. She did not eat anything harmful."

Had a fright? His gaze lowered, Mu Hanzhang turned to his father sitting by the head of the bed.

Marquis Beiwei let out a sigh. "Good thing you're all right. Go fill the prescription that the doctor gave you." This was said to Ge Ruoyi, but

when she took the prescription, instead of leaving the room, she handed it to Mu Hanzhang.

Mu Hanzhang checked it over. There was basically no difference between this and the prescription written by Doctor Jiang, aside for slight variations in some of the herbs. It was likely a mild prescription, which meant the problem was not severe.

The imperial physician accepted a thank-you gift from Marquis Beiwei and bowed at Mu Hanzhang before he left. When he reached the outer chamber and saw Jing Shao sitting on the main seat, he had no choice but to bow again.

“How did it go?” Jing Shao asked.

“Madam Qiu is not in any serious danger,” the doctor answered honestly.

Marquise Beiwei genuinely seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Jing Shao shot her a glance; he just kept getting this nagging feeling that there was something fishy about this.

Inside, Mu Hanzhang took his mother’s hand and asked her gently, “What could have given you a fright all of a sudden?”

Lady Qiu pressed her lips together. What happened earlier was truly harrowing, but now that her son was here and she finally felt as though she had someone she could rely on, her mind had calmed and even the pain in her abdomen had eased quite a bit. But a question like that from her son was something that she couldn’t answer.

She merely shook her head. “It’s fine as long as the baby is all right.”

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together, and he looked questioningly at Marquis Beiwei.

Marquis Beiwei had himself only arrived on scene after the fact, so he hadn’t had the chance to press for details. All he could do was share what he knew. “Your mother was taking a walk in the garden and almost fell into the pond. Good thing this girl is so sharp, or it would have been a disaster.”

Mu Hanzhang’s face turned cold. “Ruoyi, what happened? How many times have I told you that you must stay by her side at all times?”

Ge Ruoyi got on her knees immediately. “I’m to blame for not having taken good care of Madam Qiu, but Young Master charged out so suddenly, and he even pushed her, so I couldn’t stop him in time…”

Silence suddenly settled over the room. Mu Hanzhang kept his eyes lowered and said nothing. Marquis Beiwei was momentarily stunned—what did this have to do with Mu Lingbao? The servant who’d reported this to him never mentioned this, and this girl was only telling them this now. He felt a touch flustered.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” This made it look like he was deliberately trying to hide it.

Mu Hanzhang didn’t comment on the topic and instead pulled the quilt over Lady Qiu. “Mother, you should sleep for a while. I’ll call you when the medicine is ready.”

Lady Qiu stared at him with her beautiful eyes, knowing that he was going out to handle this incident. Even though she didn’t want to cause trouble, what happened today really had been frightening. She pursed her lips and ultimately chose to remain silent.

Marquis Beiwei, too, said a few more things to soothe her nerves before bringing Mu Hanzhang and Ge Ruoyi out of the inner chamber. He had not expected that Jing Shao would be here as well and immediately stepped forward to pay his respects.

“It is just a trivial matter within the harem, but thank you, Your Highness, for coming all this way.”

“This is no trivial matter,” Jing Shao said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, beckoning his consort to come and sit with him.

“Why haven’t I seen Brother?” Mu Hanzhang asked expressionlessly as he approached Jing Shao and sat in the place just one down from the main seat.

“Lingbao’s health hasn’t yet recovered, and he just got quite the fright, so I’ve sent him back to his rooms to rest,” said Marquise Beiwei immediately.

Had a fright? Mu Hanzhang found that incredibly comical—he bumped into a pregnant woman, but he was the one that was frightened? It

seemed he was even more delicate than a pregnant woman! Hidden in his sleeve, his hand slowly turned into a fist. They absolutely could not let today's incident slide; given how brazen these people were, there was no way the baby in his mother's belly could be delivered safely if things were glossed over so easily.

Marquis Beiwei had sat down on the other side of the main seat, and he slapped the table at this. "What do you mean he had a fright?!" He deeply cherished this child coming to him in his advanced age, and each day he looked forward to the moment they would be born. "Bring the heir here."

The servant accepted the order and left. Marquise Beiwei knew now that the matter had been exposed, and she shot Ge Ruoyi a vicious glare. But the latter paid no mind, her head lowered and her eyes half lidded as she stood behind Mu Hanzhang, clearly announcing her status as a maid of the prince's estate and that she wasn't under Marquise Beiwei's control.

As the situation was exceedingly unfavorable to Lady Du and her son, she deliberated over her words before speaking, twisting the handkerchief in her hand over and over.

"Your Lordship, Lingbao didn't do it on purpose. He must have run into her accidentally because he didn't see her. It's fortunate that the baby's unharmed, but still, he should come apologize to her."

With just a few words, she'd shirked responsibility and made it seem as if she were being exceptionally magnanimous to make the poor innocent heir come apologize to a secondary wife. Of the three sitting in the main seats, not one responded. Marquis Beiwei ignored her, and the other two couldn't even be bothered to argue.

Mu Hanzhang kept his eyes down in silence. He'd heard that Mu Lingbao had spent two months wasting away in bed, but he was able to get up and walk around now. Mu Hanzhang hadn't seen him at all recently, but it didn't take much reflection to understand that there was no way this could have been an accident. Lady Qiu had always been extremely protective of her baby, always careful not to tread anywhere too narrow or slippery, and Ge Ruoyi had also been by her side all the time. Mu Lingbao was gelded, not blinded—how could he possibly fail to see two living, breathing people?

Displaying no awareness whatsoever that he shouldn’t be interfering in the affairs of another family’s harem, Jing Shao slowly took a sip of tea. He sat in silence, blatantly showing that he was there to give his consort the backing he needed.

They waited for a long time without seeing Mu Lingbao, but they did end up meeting another imperial physician—it was Doctor Zhang, whom Jing Chen had sent for. They naturally could not decline Prince Rui’s kindness, so Marquis Beiwei tasked another servant to take him to give Lady Qiu another checkup.

Doctor Zhang was inside for a while before Mu Lingbao finally strolled in, his nonchalant attitude sending Marquis Beiwei into a fury.

“Disgraceful child! Your father sent for you, so why were you dawdling?”

Mu Lingbao’s appearance greatly surprised Mu Hanzhang. The slightly chubby man he remembered was now so gaunt that his cheeks were sunken and his gaze was hollow.

When Mu Lingbao caught sight of him, a flash of venomous resentment quickly flickered through his eyes, and he immediately perked up. In a few quick strides he rushed toward him and reached out to grab his neck. “Mu Hanzhang!”

As if Jing Shao would ever let him have his way.

“What are you doing?!” He raised a hand to grab the other man’s feeble wrist, and using the force of Mu Lingbao’s own momentum, he tossed him aside.

Mu Lingbao fell to the floor, then quickly got up, and said, pointing at Mu Hanzhang: “Was it you? You’re the one who had them throw me into the river, aren’t you?!” Mu Lingbao’s voice was no longer full and resonant the way it used to be; his tone had gotten noticeably shrill.

Jing Shao pulled his consort into his arms and patted him gently on the back as if worried that the situation might scare him. After immediately squirming free, Mu Hanzhang glared irritably at him. He then turned to Mu Lingbao. “What is the matter with you, Brother?”

Marquise Beiwei rushed up to grab Mu Lingbao. “Why are you hollering? Let me ask you, when Madam Qiu slipped earlier, why did you run off on your own instead of trying to help her?” As she spoke, she covertly pinched Mu Lingbao on the waist, signaling him to go along with what she was saying.

“Mother, according to what I heard, she certainly did not slip on her own,” Mu Hanzhang said slowly and deliberately. He didn’t intentionally project his voice, but it was loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Marquise Beiwei raised her brows and turned to glare at Mu Hanzhang. “What, are you insinuating that it was your older brother who pushed her?”

Filial piety dictated that he could not accuse his brother of such a thing; she thought it impossible that Mu Hanzhang would ever bring himself to even say it.

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips; indeed, he could not say something like that. Arguing with a quarrelsome woman would only escalate the chaos of the day. He took a deep breath and sat down next to Jing Shao. No matter how unreasonable and stubborn the others were, they had to get to the bottom of today’s incident.

This was when Doctor Zhang emerged from the inner chamber after checking Lady Qiu’s pulse, accompanied by the maid who had gone in with him. He briefly explained the situation, which was basically the same as what the previous doctor had said.

Jing Shao quietly squeezed his consort’s hand. Then, glancing at the paling Mu Lingbao, he narrowed his eyes slightly and said, “Doctor Zhang was asked to come here by Second Brother, and his medical skills are excellent. I just heard that the Beiwei heir had a bit of a fright, so why not have the doctor check on him as well while he’s here?”

At this, Mu Lingbao shouted, “No, I’m not ill!”

He knew perfectly what was wrong with his body, so of course he would refuse to be checked by an imperial physician.

Understanding what Jing Shao was playing at, Mu Hanzhang said, “Brother is compassionate and generous at heart, so of course he wouldn’t do anything like pushing Mother into the water. But being unable to see

people in broad daylight is no small matter…” Instead of finishing his sentence, he merely turned to Marquis Beiwei with a troubled look in his eyes.

Marquis Beiwei also thought that there was something strange about the way Mu Lingbao had started shouting as soon as he came in. “Please take a look at him, doctor.”

When Mu Lingbao saw the white-bearded doctor approach, he backed away in a panic, looking somewhat deranged. “Get away! Don’t come any closer!” he screamed.

Doctor Zhang glanced at the look on Jing Shao’s face, then seemed to ponder this for a moment before saying, “Forgive this one for speaking candidly, but the heir’s condition is most likely a case of nightmare psychosis.”

Everyone in the room inhaled sharply at these words. To put it mildly, “nightmare psychosis” could be considered a case of spirit possession—but to put it plainly, it simply meant he’d gone mad.

“That’s impossible!” Marquise Beiwei immediately shouted, pulling Mu Lingbao to her side. “Lingbao is just frightened. Doctor, please prescribe a calming draught. No doubt he’ll be fine once he takes it for a couple of days.”

Mu Hanzhang frowned and quietly said to Marquis Beiwei, “Father, if it truly is nightmare psychosis… Mother is still pregnant, and I heard the concubine in Brother’s quarters is also close to giving birth. A single accident is just one thing, but if it were to happen again…”

Marquise Beiwei’s expression grew even uglier. “Mu Hanzhang, that’s absurd!”

“We’ll only know whether it is or isn’t if we let the doctor examine him.” Jing Shao turned toward his consort a little, lest either of these people went mad and hurt him.

Taking Jing Shao’s hint, Doctor Zhang stepped forward and reached out to grab Mu Lingbao’s hand.

Mu Lingbao immediately shouted, “Get lost!” and shoved at the doctor before running away.

“Stop him!” Marquis Beiwei sensed that something was quite wrong and ordered the servants to block Mu Lingbao’s path at once.

He followed him into the courtyard and grabbed him by the lapel. Since Mu Lingbao lacked energy and couldn’t get out of bed after the accident, and the half dead way he looked made Mu Jin angry every time he saw him, Mu Jin had just left him alone. It hadn’t been all that long since the last time he saw him—how had he turned into this raving mess?

Pandemonium ensued in the Beiwei Estate for quite a while; in the end, Marquis Beiwei decided to temporarily confine the heir in his own main courtyard house, forbidding him from leaving it before Lady Qiu gave birth. He also asked the doctor to prescribe a bunch of calming remedies and asked Mu Lingbao’s primary wife to make sure he took them every day.

Lady Du wept and insisted on staying with her son; Marquis Beiwei seemed to have aged many years once more. When Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang left, he only gave them a feeble wave.

It wasn’t as though Mu Hanzhang had been dead set on having Marquis Beiwei punish Mu Lingbao in any way—he was satisfied as long as his mother’s safety could be guaranteed. However, he remained silent throughout the whole journey back.

Jing Shao rubbed his chin against the top of Mu Hanzhang’s head, holding him close. “If you’re tired, lean on me and rest for a bit. We’ll be home soon.”

“I never thought Mu Lingbao would become like this…” Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. It appeared that the injury had dealt a huge blow to Mu Lingbao’s psyche.

“He brought it on himself,” Jing Shao said, pulling Mu Hanzhang closer into his arms. “You lost the use of your meridians when you were a child, and yet you never gave in to despair. All he lost was a mere bit of fun—his limbs and his meridians are all still intact. Instead of pulling himself together and trying to seek revenge, he can only think of taking out his anger on women and those weaker than himself. Nothing about him deserves your sympathy.” He knew that his consort had a soft heart, but someone like Mu Lingbao would return no gratitude even if you showed him mercy.

Mu Hanzhang nodded slightly. What had happened was already in the past, so there was no use thinking about it anymore. All that mattered now was keeping his mother safe.

Chapter 88:
Peach Forest

IN THE CAPITAL, Gu Huaiqing moved about in secrecy; according to Hao Dadao, he'd been leaving early and returning late, and Hao Dadao had no idea where he went. Jing Shao urged Gu Huaiqing to leave as soon as possible, but he simply kept making excuses, pushing back his date of departure day after day after day.

"Are you sure that man is King Huainan?" Jing Yu asked with a frown when he heard what the man said.

"Of course I'm absolutely sure."

The man who spoke to him was still dressed in court attire, and he was talking quietly to the fourth prince while standing in the palace courtyard. "He even came to see me in person yesterday. Having been in contact with him for so many years, this one can certainly confirm that he is Gu Huaiqing."

Jing Yu's gaze flicked left and right. "Where is he staying right now?"

"As for that, this one does not know." That man seemed to be in a bind. Gu Huaiqing had always exercised caution, and even his most trusted subordinates might not know his whereabouts. "But he did tell me that he's been staying in the capital, and if I need to talk to him, to leave a message at The Immortal Feast."

When he heard this, Jing Yu immediately came up with a plan. Catching King Huainan entering the capital without an imperial summons was a contribution worthy of recognition. Even though it wasn't a serious crime, Father just happened to be troubled over the fact that he could not find any fault with King Huainan. This was precisely the opportunity Jing Yu needed, with clear evidence that he'd been bribing officials in the capital and had entered the city without permission—clearly up to no good. And so, he turned and headed toward the imperial study.

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As he watched Gu Huaiqing leisurely sipping wine across from him, all Jing Shao could feel was the veins in his forehead twitching away.

“What exactly did you come to the capital for?” he asked.

Gu Huaiqing shot one look at the fist Jing Shao was ready to throw in his direction at any moment and said with deliberate slowness, “To ease the pain of my longing.”

“Quit your bullshit,” said Jing Shao, his eyes growing fierce. “Just tell me. What on earth are you here for?”

“I’m the big brother here, you know? Can’t you be a little more respectful to me?” Gu Huaiqing said angrily, slamming his wine cup on the table.

“Oh, you know perfectly well that you’re my big brother here, yet you keep making moves on Junqing!” Jing Shao said even more angrily, likewise slamming his wine cup on the table.

When Mu Hanzhang walked into the peach grove with several packages of marinated snacks in his arms, it was to the two men inside the pavilion locked in a staring contest, clearly on the verge of coming to blows once again.

“I was only gone for a moment. How are you now arguing again?”

When the two of them saw him, they simultaneously put on smiling faces and said in unison, “We were just playing around!” And then they exchanged a glare.

Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help covering his lips to hide a soft chuckle. He opened the packages of food wrapped in oiled paper. The sensitive nature of Gu Huaiqing’s identity meant that they couldn’t let other people know about him, so even Yun Song had been left behind outside the garden. When he got them food, Mu Hanzhang had to go to the gate himself to fetch it for them.

Mu Hanzhang took the items out of the packages and arranged them neatly on the plates one by one. “Here’s some marinated snack foods from

the south side of the city. They're Jing Shao's favorite. He's always saying that if you ever come to the capital, he must make sure you try some."

"You always know just what to say, Hanzhang," said Gu Huaiqing, all smiles as he picked up a chicken wing.

"Brother, that's enough!" Jing Shao squeezed the chicken wing in his hand so hard the bones made a crackling sound.

"Rah!" A black-and-yellow ball of fur suddenly bolted out of the woods, then put his paws on Jing Shao's knees as he put his nose right against the marinated chicken wing in his hand.

Gu Huaiqing took one look at the increasingly solid little tiger and teased him with a chicken wing. "My my, you even brought him along?"

Mu Hanzhang rubbed his furry head. "If he's cooped up at home all the time I worry he'd turn into a house cat, so I took him for a walk." Li'l Sunbeam nuzzled his palm, then turned around and bared his teeth at Gu Huaiqing.

"This is a rather nice garden, though. Too bad the peaches aren't ripe yet." Gu Huaiqing put the chicken wing in front of the tiger's mouth and nearly got himself bitten.

Li'l Sunbeam seemed rather hostile toward Gu Huaiqing, and when he failed to bite him, he reached out with a paw and tried to scratch him. He only calmed down once Mu Hanzhang rubbed the back of his head a little, but a continuous low growl emanated from his throat as though he was ready to pounce on him at any moment.

"This garden belongs to my older brother." Jing Shao glanced up at a peach branch reaching inside the pavilion. Quite a few downy peaches hung from the branch, but they were small and yet unripe. "Another fortnight and the peaches will be ready to eat."

"So this garden belongs to Jing Chen?" asked Gu Huaiqing, seemingly surprised.

He looked around him. The peach forest was lush and green, and the neatly trimmed grass stretched on like an emerald tapestry. One could well imagine how splendid the forest would look when the peach blossoms were in full bloom. "Is he coming today?"

“He’ll be here soon,” said Jing Shao, picking up the wine jar to pour his consort a cup of green plum wine.

The cup Mu Hanzhang used differed from the cups used by the other two; it was not handmade by Miss Mei but was a delicate little wine vessel of nephrite jade.

Gu Huaiqing looked down at the worn bamboo cup in his hand, then at the cup of jade so fine it was almost translucent, suddenly finding his status as “older brother” rather pathetic. “I understand that your wife is used to being pampered, but isn’t this favoritism a bit blatant?”

Jing Shao ignored him. Whenever Junqing was deep in thought, he had a habit of tracing his fingers over whatever was in his hand, and ever since he’d pricked his finger on a bamboo splinter, Jing Shao had gotten into the habit of carrying a small nephrite jade cup with him for his consort to use when there wasn’t a suitable cup available. Thus, both the little cup and the little box of fragrant balm became necessities Jing Shao had with him at all times.

When Mu Hanzhang took the small white jade cup from him, he felt a wave of warmth that spread from his fingertips all the way into his heart.

“Rah-ah!” Li’l Sunbeam suddenly gave a cry and left the pavilion. He ran a few steps, then crouched down low to hide in the grass. Then, with his rear in the air, he trod the ground with his hind paws as if he might pounce at any moment.

Jing Shao glanced at Li’l Sunbeam and stood up. “Is someone here?”

At those words, Gu Huaiqing stood up as well. Soon, they heard two voices from behind the trees.

“Your tastes are sure refined, Your Highness. The peach blossoms have already all fallen, and the peaches are not yet ripe, yet you’re still in the mood to have wine here?” There was a touch of barely concealed arrogance in that youthful voice—which belonged to the fourth prince, Jing Yu!

“I was just coming by to look around.” This calm, pleasant voice belonged to Prince Rui, Jing Chen. It was slightly louder than usual, clearly as a reminder to those on the other side of the trees.

Damn it! Mu Hanzhang looked around. While this garden could keep most anyone out, it could not keep out the thick-skinned fourth prince who had followed Jing Chen inside. Even though Jing Yu did not know Gu Huaiqing, seeing a stranger in Prince Rui's private garden would certainly rouse his suspicions. Jing Yu tended to seize on the smallest mistake his two other brothers made, so he'd surely never let the fact that an unidentified stranger was in Jing Chen's garden go uninvestigated.

They could already see the dark-yellow hems of Jing Yu's casual attire when Jing Shao had a sudden idea. He whistled at Li'l Sunbeam and tossed his chicken wing right at Jing Yu.

"Raowr!" This was one game the cub had always loved, and when he saw Jing Shao toss the tasty food, he shot up three feet into the air and charged out like a yellow-black arrow.

"Ah!" Jing Yu let out a startled scream as the tiger pounced out of the grove. Then suddenly something greasy hit him in the face and scared him so much that he tripped backward over a protruding tree root. At the same time, that ferocious tiger was upon him.

Jing Yu fell to the ground. The tiger, already pretty hefty by now, pounced on top of him and pinned him by the shoulders. He opened his great big sacrificial bowl of a maw, showing a mouthful of fully grown-in teeth, every last one terribly sharp.

"Help!" Jing Yu turned pale with fright as he saw the tiger open his mouth to bite his neck, and as he struggled, he went for his blade.

"Don't move!" Nearby, Jing Chen suddenly spoke up, stopping Jing Yu from drawing his sword. The tiger found a chicken wing in the hollow of his collarbone, snatched it in between his teeth, and ran off.

Jing Yu climbed to his feet. He belatedly realized that that was only a half-grown tiger, not even two feet long. With his rear sticking up in the air, he swaggered into the pavilion in the center of the grove where the Prince Cheng couple stood.

Chapter 89:
Crisis

MU HANZHANG STROKED the furry tiger rubbing against his leg and offered Jing Yu a mildly apologetic bow. “The cub’s still little and quite mischievous. Please do forgive him for offending Your Highness.”

Jing Shao greeted Jing Yu rather insincerely, dusting off Jing Yu’s clothes for him, though his pats were so hard that he was almost throwing Jing Yu to the ground with each one.

“Hey, Fourth Brother. I’m really sorry. You know, you should have let me know you were coming. You just happened to show up right when I started tossing chicken wings.”

Jing Chen glanced dispassionately at the three cups on the table and shot a look at Mu Hanzhang. The latter immediately slipped his own small nephrite jade cup into his sleeve.

When Jing Yu saw that Father had once again summoned Jing Chen to the imperial study to speak to him alone, then saw Jing Chen heading straight for the south side of the city the moment he came out of the study, he’d thought Father had entrusted him with some important task, which was why he’d followed him. To his surprise, it was nothing more than a prior engagement with the Prince Cheng couple for a drink.

The four of them sat in the peach garden for a while, exchanging polite, empty words. Jing Shao couldn’t help yawning repeatedly, then finally found an excuse to leave with his consort.

As the youngest brother, Jing Yu couldn’t exactly stay once Prince Cheng was gone. So, he too took his leave. But before he left, he cast a resentful glare at that hyperactive tiger. He was sure that the chicken wing that landed on his face was no accident.

Once the three were gone, Jing Chen sat alone in the pavilion for a while longer. The green plum wine was quite mild, so there was no fear of getting drunk even if he drank a few more cups. His legitimate second son

had once again fallen ill; Lady Xiao's temper was only getting worse, and his head would start hurting whenever he went home.

When Lady Xiao married him, she used to be a gentle and refined lady of noble birth, but ever since she had their second son, she'd become somewhat paranoid. On top of that, since Xiao-Si was born at almost the same time as the common son his princely concubine had, she felt slighted…

Jing Chen stared at the peach trees in the garden with their laden branches and thought his younger brother really ought to have an heir. But for now there was no need to rush any of that; after all, it wasn't something he could do while his father was still on the throne. He could wait to bring it up once he'd ascended the throne himself.

"Drinking alone is so boring. Want some company?" said a voice from behind him, clear, pleasant to the ear, and colored with more than a hint of flippancy.

Jing Chen suddenly felt his headache worsen.

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THE NEXT DAY, as soon as morning court was dismissed, someone pulled Jing Yu aside.

"Your Highness, this one saw King Huainan heading to Prince Rui's peach garden on the south side of the city yesterday," said that man, flustered.

"What did you say? Prince Rui's peach garden?" Jing Yu's brow twitched. "Are you sure you're not mistaken?" After all, he'd also been in the peach garden yesterday.

"It absolutely is true." The man looked visibly worked up. "Yesterday, this one went to the south end of the city on business and happened to see King Huainan. His two bodyguards were even on guard outside the peach garden."

Jing Yu quickly recalled yesterday's events and was reminded of the chicken wing that flew his way. He hadn't quite believed that Jing Shao had done that by accident, and he'd initially thought it was done deliberately to embarrass him. But now it seemed to him that there might have been another person in that pavilion at the time, and Jing Shao was trying to cover up for him!

The more he thought about it, the more he felt it likely, and Jing Yu's palms grew wet with sweat. If it was true, then Jing Shao was colluding with a vassal king. Since they were meeting in the peach garden, maybe Prince Rui was also involved. If he handled this properly, he could set Jing Chen up to take a huge tumble.

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WHEN MU HANZHANG heard that Xiao-Si at the Prince Rui Estate was ill, and his fever would not subside even after two imperial physicians had seen him, he sent a servant to bring some precious medicinal herbs over to them.

Lady Xiao looked at her son as he cried and cried in the wet nurse's arms and could not relax her furrowed brows. Her gaze then fell on the healthy, lively common-born son in the next basket over, and her heart grew ever more irritated. They'd fed her son the prescription written by the imperial physician for two days straight, but there'd been no improvement. This fever that kept coming back was driving her mad with worry.

Afraid of being scolded, the wet nurse suggested that sometimes when a child was ill, they weren't actually ill, and perhaps something might be haunting them. "I heard that Master Mobei of the Jadecloud Nunnery can work wonders. Why don't we—"

"If he's still not better tomorrow, then let's invite her over and see what she can do."

Princely Consort Rui took one look at the items sent by the Prince Cheng Estate, told the servants to relay her thanks, and stored them in the

treasury. She hadn't even said she was giving him to them yet—who were they trying to impress by being this excessively attentive?

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"How did it go?" Mu Hanzhang asked Yun Zhu, who had made the delivery.

Yun Zhu relayed the words told to him: "She thanked Your Highness for your concern and said that things have been quite busy in their household of late and she is unable to receive guests. She will be sure to invite Your Highness over some other time."

Mu Hanzhang waved at him in dismissal, his brows drawing together. The rare medicinal herbs he'd sent were all things he knew she could use to treat a young child's fever, and if that was Princely Consort Rui's reply, it must have meant she barely even looked at it before replying with stock courtesies. It seemed the child really was seriously ill.

At the same time, Gu Huaiqing was drinking with Jing Shao at The Immortal Feast.

"I'll be leaving today," said Gu Huaiqing, pouring Jing Shao a cup of wine.

"So you finally came to your senses." Jing Shao cast a look toward him. "Tell me, what on earth were you trying to accomplish by coming to the capital just to wander around for days?"

Gu Huaiqing smiled and said softly, "I was ghost hunting."

"Ghost hunting?" Jing Shao paused in surprise, then he sneered. "When did you become a charlatan?"

Gu Huaiqing smiled without a word.

Just then, a commotion erupted downstairs. The two of them walked to the window, and to his surprise, Jing Shao saw the fourth prince Jing Yu surrounding The Immortal Feast with a detachment of men.

Now that Jing Yu was overseeing the Ministry of Justice, it did mean that he now had more people at his disposal. Jing Shao frowned. “What’s going on?”

“Here comes the ghost,” said Gu Huaiqing, casting a glance at a certain man next to the fourth prince, a disdainful smile pulling at his lips.

“We are under orders to arrest a wanted criminal. No one in the building is allowed to leave. Inspect them all individually!” shouted the leading officer, who then waved a hand and led his officers on the search. As if he already knew what he was looking for, he only left a few of his people downstairs before coming up to search the private dining rooms on the second floor.

Accompanied by the official at his side, Jing Yu was checking each room, and they would soon reach the one Jing Shao was in. There were officers all over the building, and the building was surrounded. Jing Yu had made thorough preparations to make sure there was no chance that King Huainan could escape.

“What an inescapable trap,” said Gu Huaiqing, watching the approaching officers.

Jing Shao furrowed his brow. It looked as if Jing Yu had received some information. He turned to Gu Huaiqing; based on how calm he was, it seemed he knew this was coming.

“What are you planning to do?”

“It’s not hard to escape from The Immortal Feast.” Gu Huaiqing pushed the window open. The private room he’d chosen faced the roof of the building next door, and with their skills, sneaking out along the shaded side of the roof wouldn’t be difficult at all. “But I’m guessing the fourth prince must have already sealed the city gates. So, if I want to leave the city, I’m going to need your help.”

When Jing Shao heard that, his temper flared. “You saw this coming all along?” This man knew full well this would happen and still invited him over for drinks, making it quite clear that he was counting on Jing Shao to be part of his plan.

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JING YU HAD BROUGHT his men to The Immortal Feast only to come up empty, and his humiliation had him lashing out at the official next to him.

“Didn’t you say that you were sure he’d be here?!”

The official was so frightened that he broke out in a cold sweat. “This — This one—”

He had indeed arranged to meet the man here, using the very same method King Huainan had given him. And he’d emphasized that the news he was going to tell King Huainan was extremely important, so there was no way he would ever want to miss it. So why hadn’t he come?

“Seal the city gates immediately!” Jing Yu was so angry that he was starting to look a little blue. He had repeatedly assured Emperor Hongzheng that King Huainan was in the capital before obtaining an imperial edict for his arrest. Now that King Huainan had escaped, how could he possibly explain himself to his father? It was fortunate he hadn’t yet revealed Prince Cheng’s collusion with King Huainan, otherwise failing to capture King Huainan would only make his father believe he was slandering his brother.

By this time, Jing Shao had already escorted Gu Huaiqing out of the city gates at a full gallop. Still on their horses, Jing Shao threw a punch at Gu Huaiqing across the way. “You knew there were problems with that informant, and you still waited around to get caught?”

Gu Huaiqing narrowed his slender eyes and gave him a smile that was as innocent as could be. “If I hadn’t been waiting there, then how could I have realized the depth of this brotherly bond between us?”

Jing Shao was momentarily stunned. Was he saying that his whole purpose for coming to the capital was to see how sincere Jing Shao was about cooperating with him? At this, he couldn’t help but fall silent. He knew how distrustful Gu Huaiqing was by nature, but his brother had already gone to speak with him as the future ruler. Didn’t that make them trustworthy enough?

Noticing the odd look on his face, Gu Huaiqing immediately spurred his horse over to punch him in the arm. “What are you thinking about now? I was just teasing you.” As he said so, he pulled a little booklet from beneath his lapel and stuffed it into Jing Shao’s hand.

Jing Shao glanced down at the thin stack of paper in his hand and turned back to Gu Huaiqing in confusion.

“It’s my network of contacts in the capital. The ones that aren’t good anymore are already circled in cinnabar ink.” Gu Huaiqing smiled. “Give it to Jing Chen. Also, tell him that Zhao Jiulin, the vice minister of rites, is one of the fourth prince’s men, so he should be careful.”

Zhao Jiulin was the man who was with Jing Yu today. No doubt he was the one who leaked his whereabouts to the fourth prince. Stunned, Jing Shao flipped through the booklet in his hands. King Huainan had been painstakingly cultivating these connections over many years, so to hand them to him now meant he was handing Jing Shao his entire life and fortune!

“Brother…” Jing Shao didn’t know what to say.

In his previous life, this man had been his most respected, admired rival, but even now he couldn’t figure out what Gu Huaiqing was actually thinking. Sometimes, this man seemed extremely shrewd and inscrutable, his actions opaque and impossible to grasp, yet at other times he seemed a passionate soul genuinely driven by sentiment. If he felt like it, he could entrust you with his entire fortune—and even his life!

Gu Huaiqing laughed heartily. “I’m guessing it won’t be long before His Majesty decides to abolish another feudatory. I’ll be waiting for you in Jiangnan.”

With a smile, Gu Huaiqing punched Jing Shao in the gut, trying to make up for all the beatings he’d taken from Jing Shao lately.

The blow had Jing Shao doubled over, racked with dry coughs, and by the time he looked up again, Gu Huaiqing had already turned his horse around. Not far from them, his two bodyguards were riding their fine horses toward him.

“Don’t forget to bring your tiger cub so the lion can teach him how to hunt!” Gu Huaiqing then sped away, fearful that Jing Shao would try

catching up to him for a retaliatory punch.

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WHEN JING SHAO GOT BACK to his estate, he immediately sensed that something was off. The entire place was eerily quiet, and all the servants seemed to be holding their breaths, not daring to make a sound.

"Your Highness, His Majesty is here," Master Yun whispered.

Jing Shao immediately broke out in a cold sweat. It couldn't be that Jing Yu had revealed his meeting with King Huainan, could it? He carefully tried to recall whether he'd let anything slip.

Duofu greeted Jing Shao with his face all scrunched up with stress. "His Majesty is in the study." Lowering his voice, he said, "Your Highness, the princely consort asked me to tell you that no matter what His Majesty says, you must insist that you don't know King Huainan. The person you left the city to see off today was a friend from the underground."

When he heard this, Jing Shao couldn't help quickening his pace. Junqing telling him this meant that Father must have learned something, but couldn't be sure, and so he'd come to Jing Shao's place to ask him about it. Or perhaps Junqing had taken the blame himself in order to exonerate him! Either way, Junqing could not be allowed to face Father alone.

Chapter 90:
Questioned

A BUNCH OF BODYGUARDS and handmaidens stood outside the study of the Zephyr Pavilion, but none of them dared to enter.

Emperor Hongzheng sat behind the desk, fiddling with the crystal glass in his hand. “You believe that opening trade with foreign nations is good for the Chen Empire?”

“This one believes that foreigners beyond the sea are covetous of the Chen Empire’s products but are frustrated due to a lack of access.” Mu Hanzhang stood meekly before the desk, his tone calm, his demeanor neither humble nor overbearing. “This one has read the ledgers detailing the tributes from the foreign nations, and while in Dongnan, this one asked the maritime merchants about the prices of goods. Allegedly, each foot of a bolt of silk could fetch ten gold coins, which is two taels of gold.”

“Hanzhang, why do you still refer to yourself as ‘this one’?” Emperor Hongzheng smiled, and instead of responding to what he said earlier, he said, “From the day you married into the imperial family, you should have been referring to yourself as my son.”

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips and seemed a little embarrassed. “Your son will keep that in mind.”

This was what Jing Shao saw when he came in—not the tense standoff he’d imagined, but what appeared to be a harmonious and happy occasion—so he couldn’t help but feel a little stunned.

Emperor Hongzheng saw Jing Shao enter and immediately put his smile away. “Where were you?”

“Your son was seeing off a friend,” said Jing Shao truthfully. Inwardly, he was muttering to himself, *I must have been adopted and Junqing’s his real son. How come there’s never a pleasant look on his face when he sees me?*

Emperor Hongzheng looked at him deeply for a long moment, then lowered his eyes and started flipping through a strategy tome on the desk. “King Huainan has recently shown himself in the capital. Are you aware of it?”

“King Huainan?” Jing Shao sneaked a glance at his consort. “Your son didn’t know.”

“You didn’t know?” Emperor Hongzheng closed the densely annotated book in his hand, then got up and walked over to Jing Shao. “Who did you see off today?”

Jing Shao felt a sudden jolt in his heart but allowed nothing to show on his face. Since Father was questioning him like this, he must have already known that Gu Huaiqing had left the capital. The only thing he wasn’t sure about was whether Jing Shao was the one that got him out of the city.

Jing Shao figured that idiot Jing Yu wouldn’t dare say anything to Father unless he’d caught them red-handed. “A friend from the underground.”

“A friend from the underground that you met at The Immortal Feast?” Emperor Hongzheng looked at him coldly.

The Immortal Feast! Jing Shao thought he heard something explode inside his head. Father must have known that man was Gu Huaiqing if he was bringing up The Immortal Feast! After the blankness that took over his mind, he suddenly recalled what Junqing told him through Duofu—Junqing had told him to adamantly deny knowing Gu Huaiqing and claim he was just a friend from the criminal underground. And since Father did not send anyone to intercept him knowing full well that Gu Huaiqing was trying to escape, that meant Father meant to let Gu Huaiqing go, and the reason he’d come today was to see whether there was actual collusion between Jing Shao and King Huainan.

All these thoughts only took a moment to flash through his mind. Jing Shao looked up at his father and admitted, “I met this man in Jiangnan. He’d come to the capital for some sightseeing, but he found out today that his mother’s seriously ill, so he was anxious to leave the city and came to me for help.”

Thrack! Jing Shao had just finished talking when a solid slap landed on his face, and he reeled from the blow.

“You are indeed a man of sentiment. Do you even realize that man was King Huainan, Gu Huaiqing?!”

Emperor Hongzheng looked at him with bitter disappointment. While this son of his was capable, he was practically raised feral—not at all like a son of the imperial family and far more like a vigilante from the criminal underground. Not only was he hot-tempered, but he also insisted on following all those underworld codes of loyalty and brotherhood. It was truly infuriating.

The corner of Jing Shao’s mouth bled from the blow, but he couldn’t spare a thought to cover his face. He seemed utterly bewildered, then he dropped to his knees. “Your son really did not know. He said his name was Gu Qing. We met by chance in Jiangnan, and I have kept my identity concealed in all the time we’ve spent together. Your son…” Jing Shao sounded clearly flustered, as though he was entirely discombobulated to suddenly hear such a piece of astonishing news.

Mu Hanzhang knelt down beside Jing Shao as well. “Father, your son also met that man in Jiangnan. His Highness really did not know his identity.”

Emperor Hongzheng looked down at him, his expression softening slightly. From the very start, Mu Hanzhang had said that the friend Jing Shao was seeing off was one they’d met in Jiangnan. If he was trying to hide something, he surely wouldn’t have given that explanation. He turned to Jing Shao again and noticed that he no longer looked panicked; instead, he was holding his head high, seemingly defiant.

“What, you’re feeling indignant now?”

“Your son would not dare,” Jing Shao said, lowering his head, but his tone was a little stiff.

Emperor Hongzheng was so angry that he almost laughed. “We did not say that you were colluding with a vassal king, and yet you’re going to be indignant first?”

“Father, you told Fourth Brother about King Huainan’s identity, but you never told me!” Jing Shao looked up at his father.

Even though he'd said this to sabotage Jing Yu, this moment's questioning had come from his heart. He'd always known about Emperor Hongzheng's favoritism; no matter what mistake Jing Yu might make, it always came to nothing in the end, while Jing Shao was always met with extra reproach, and in the end, his father had imprisoned him over a bunch of baseless charges.

Emperor Hongzheng stared motionlessly for a long moment. He was reminded now that he had indeed never told the fourth prince. He himself had known because a minister that King Huainan visited had reported it to him, but how did Jing Yu ever find out?

With his hands behind his back, Emperor Hongzheng paced a little. "Instead of thinking about where you went wrong, you're criticizing us?"

"Your son would not dare." Jing Shao held his head high, clearly still defiant.

Emperor Hongzheng pointed down at him, his fingertip trembling with his fury. "You are to reflect on your mistakes behind closed doors at the estate, and without our decree, you are not allowed to go anywhere!"

"Father, please quell your anger!" Mu Hanzhang quickly spoke up to calm him and shoved Jing Shao. "Your Highness!"

As though he'd just come back to himself, Jing Shao bowed his head and kowtowed to admit he was in the wrong. "Your son submits to this decree."

"Hmph!" Emperor Hongzheng snorted derisively at that and departed with a whip of his sleeve. Just before he stepped out the door, he turned back and said, "Hanzhang, write up a set of regulations based on what you said earlier. Let us take a look at it some other day."

"Certainly!" Mu Hanzhang immediately replied and rose so he could see Emperor Hongzheng out.

Emperor Hongzheng waved a hand so that Mu Hanzhang would not see him off any further and left in a fury with his bodyguards and eunuchs in tow.

After a moment of silence, Mu Hanzhang walked over to Jing Shao, squatted down to look at him, and said, "Father is already gone."

Jing Shao slowly sat down on the floor and wiped the cold sweat from his brow, letting out a long breath. “Good thing I have you.”

Mu Hanzhang reached out and gently touched Jing Shao’s cheek, reddened from the slap, his cool fingers soothing the sting of the burning handprint. Jing Shao nuzzled greedily into that palm. It didn’t matter how biased his father might be; at least he had this man’s unwavering support. That was enough.

Mu Hanzhang quietly looked down at the man gently nuzzling his hand. While Emperor Hongzheng wasn’t paying attention to Jing Shao when he had asked that question of him earlier, Mu Hanzhang was, and he saw it, crystal clear—there was real resentment in Jing Shao’s eyes. A prince who no longer had his mother’s protection had no leeway to negotiate with the emperor; if ever there was conflict between them, he could only bear it directly.

Pity welled up in his heart and overflowed. He slowly reached out and pulled Jing Shao into his embrace. “Father is not showing favoritism. It’s just that as a ruler, he must ensure there is balance between competing forces.”

Emperor Hongzheng had surely been well aware of the problems inside the Ministry of Revenue. The reason he had not severely punished the fourth prince’s faction ultimately came down to imperial strategy. The court required checks and balances; so as long as his bottom line was not crossed, a shrewd emperor would choose to turn a blind eye.

Suddenly pulled into a warm, sweet embrace imbued with a fresh fragrance, Jing Shao sat stunned for a moment, then greedily took a deep breath, instinctively nestling closer to Mu Hanzhang’s chest. Then he reached out and wrapped his arms around that supple waist.

“Junqing, I’ve been grounded again. Why don’t you skip morning court too?”

Mu Hanzhang looked down at him. “Why would I?”

“That way we can sleep in. Also, we’ll be able to fit in another round in the morning!” said Jing Shao with a sparkle in his eyes.

Chapter 91:
Influence

FEELING SORRY FOR THIS MAN, Mu Hanzhang decided, was nothing but a waste of time. He pushed away the big head rubbing against his chest and said, “Morning court isn’t school—I can’t just decide not to go. I still have a lot to do.” He ignored Jing Shao’s resentful eyes and got up, walking out of the study.

He summoned Yun Zhu and told him to go to the Prince Rui Estate to inform them of Jing Shao’s house arrest. Mu Hanzhang paid no attention to his prince, who was still sitting on the carpet throwing a tantrum, and went straight back to the small study in the east wing. The regulations that Emperor Hongzheng had just asked for needed to be drafted as soon as possible.

Jing Shao stared helplessly as his consort left him behind, and a sense of despondent desolation welled up in his heart like a man who’d lost his job and was going to need his wife to support the family.

When Jing Chen got the news, he rushed over before it was even time for dinner. Emperor Hongzheng’s orders dictated that Jing Shao couldn’t go anywhere, but he never said that no one was allowed to visit him.

“This is from Gu Huaiqing. It’s for you,” said Jing Shao, handing him the small booklet with the list of names.

An odd look suddenly came over Jing Chen’s face. “He’s already given me a copy.”

Jing Shao was suddenly speechless. Jing Chen shared in his speechlessness.

“Damn Gu Huaiqing! And to think I was moved for even a moment!” Jing Shao practically boiled over with rage. That guy had actually used the same thing to con them both.

After carefully scanning each line in the booklet in his hand, Jing Chen found that it contained different names from the one he had received.

And so he pulled out the one he was keeping in his sleeve and realized that only by combining the two halves would he have a complete list of Gu Huaiqing's network. Perhaps Gu Huaiqing had done this to confirm whether the two brothers were truly of one mind; after all, no matter whose hands such an item fell into, it would give that person considerable influence, and if the brothers were not united, and each kept only his own copy, they would surely misuse it. Then word would get back to Gu Huaiqing, and he'd likely have to reconsider this collaboration with them.

Jing Shao was left quite bewildered after hearing his brother's analysis. "He sure thinks a lot."

"The Huainan fiefdom is his ancestors' legacy. If I had to wager the Chen Empire, I wouldn't trust anyone so easily either." Jing Chen put the two booklets together and tucked them back into his sleeve. He did not begrudge Gu Huaiqing's methods; after all, if the two brothers were not united when it came to something like cooperating with a vassal king, mistakes were bound to happen, and King Huainan would also suffer as a result.

Jing Shao took a sip of tea and suddenly remembered what Gu Huaiqing made sure to tell him before he left—the man who went to search The Immortal Feast with Jing Yu. "Also, Vice Minister of Rites Zhao Jiulin has already pledged allegiance to Jing Yu."

Jing Chen frowned. The Ministry of Rites was under his jurisdiction. He hadn't expected Jing Yu to have already extended his reach this far.

"Brother, let's bribe someone in the Ministry of Justice too," said Jing Shao angrily. That smug look on Jing Yu's face had been so irritating.

Jing Chen glanced at him. "The minister of justice is on my side."

Jing Shao nearly spat the tea out of his mouth.

"From now on, if there's anything you don't understand at court, go ask Hanzhang." Jing Chen set down his teacup and sat up.

It was getting late. Prince Cheng had just been reprimanded, so for Jing Chen to visit him so openly was already inappropriate; he naturally could not stay for dinner.

After seeing off his older brother, Jing Shao, wilted and glum, returned to the east wing to look for his consort. It seemed as though ever since Junqing was allowed to attend court, his brother no longer counted on him for anything to do with politics.

Mu Hanzhang was hunched over the desk writing trade regulations when suddenly a large, warm body pressed up against his back.

“Are you hungry? Why don’t you start eating now, and I’ll join you once I finish writing this page.” Mu Hanzhang patted the big head resting over his shoulder, but his brush never stopped moving as it rapidly left one elegant and powerful character after another on the sheet of paper.

Jing Shao shook his head and waited for him to finish with the page before he said, “Junqing, just how far does my brother’s influence reach in the imperial court?”

Mu Hanzhang set down his brush and glanced at him. “I’m not entirely sure how many are in his faction, but from the number of officials I’ve come into contact with recently, at least three out of every ten officials of the court are on his side.”

But most of them hid themselves quite well, especially those in high-ranking positions, such as the minister of war, who was often seen at court opposing Jing Chen’s proposals. That was why even Mu Hanzhang was stunned upon coming into contact with the extent of Jing Chen’s influence.

It sounded unbelievable for almost a third of the court’s officials to pledge their allegiance to a single prince. After all, Emperor Hongzheng had such a firm grasp of power that he should have had the majority of the court under his thumb. Take the fourth prince, for instance: It was hard for him to try to get a spoonful of power out of the cup his father held, let alone command three out of ten.

But Jing Shao merely nodded at these words. This was actually within his expectations.

Mu Hanzhang rose from his seat, but the man stuck to his back like rice malt, leaving him resigned to dragging this great big tail behind him.

“It hasn’t even been ten years since Brother left the palace to establish his own estate. How did he become so powerful?” he asked.

Jing Shao clung to his consort, slowly shuffling along behind him. There was only a single roofed floral corridor between the small study and their quarters; there was nowhere to hide nearby it, so he had no fear of being overheard.

“Most of it is the influence left behind by our maternal grandfather.”

Maternal grandfather? Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together as he thought about it. The late empress was not from a noble house—her father was the prime minister that served two successive emperors. It was said that when the former emperor passed away, there was chaos due to several princes vying for the throne, and it was this Lord Prime Minister’s single-handed assistance that allowed Emperor Hongzheng to defeat his ferocious brothers and secure his current position. However, throughout all these years Mu Hanzhang had never heard anything said about the prime minister’s faction, and even Jing Shao rarely spoke of him.

“It’s not that I can’t talk about it, just that there’s not much to tell,” Jing Shao said.

It was after dinner, and Jing Shao sat in the courtyard with his consort in his arms to enjoy the cool evening. It was lovely and clear tonight, and the stars in the night sky were quite bright.

The late empress’s maternal family had the surname Qu, and she was the youngest and only daughter of Prime Minister Qu. Jing Shao’s two maternal uncles died young, and Jing Shao could not remember meeting them after he was old enough to retain memories. When the late empress passed away, Prime Minister Qu, who was in his later years of life, was so devastated by the loss of his daughter that he followed her soon after.

Thankfully, Jing Chen was already capable of standing on his own by then, which was how the prime minister’s faction hadn’t been broken up entirely. Was it out of respect for his father-in-law that Emperor Hongzheng hadn’t appointed a prime minister all these years and instead spread the prime minister’s duties among the six ministries?

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together, but he also thought there was no way it could be so simple. “Then what happened to the Zhuo clan?”

Jing Shao looked down at the head lying against his chest. Mu Hanzhang’s fair chin was resting right over his heart, and his beautiful eyes

reflected the evening's starlight, making them seem particularly bright. He couldn't help running a hand over his head.

"Minister Zhuo was Grandfather's disciple. The Zhuo family had strict family discipline, which was why Mother chose Zhuo Yunji to be Brother's study companion."

When the late empress was still alive, Jing Shao basically behaved like he owned the palace. The Qu clan, the late empress, the Zhuo clan…

Mu Hanzhang felt like he had discovered something unspeakable and found himself reaching out to touch the bruising corner of Jing Shao's lips. "From now on, you'll have me to protect you."

Jing Shao stared at him quietly, then he pulled that warm body toward him and pressed a deep kiss to those soft lips. The heavens had taken away the mother who loved him, but they'd also given him this wonderful Junqing; fate had never treated him unfairly. He really was quite content.

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IN THE PRINCE RUI ESTATE, Xiao-Si's fever simply wouldn't go down, so they invited the nun called Mobei from the Jadecloud Nunnery to check on him. The elderly nun gave them a yellow packet of some powder and said that he'd be all better if he drank it dissolved in breast milk. Skeptical, Lady Xiao had the wet nurse feed it to him, and afterward, the child's condition did seem to improve. She gave the nun a generous gift right then and there, thoroughly convinced by this Master Mobei's abilities.

A gray hat on her head, Mobei put her palms together and said rather mysteriously, "See, before a child gets to a year old, they can often see what ordinary people can't. Babies that get night terrors are usually haunted by something."

“Master, can you tell me what exactly is haunting him?” Lady Xiao asked quite seriously.

“Those capable of causing severe ailments are often evil spirits, but that might not be the case.” Mobei turned the sandalwood beads on her wrist as she spoke, carefully observing the look on Lady Xiao’s face as she did. “Forgive me for being candid, but judging by His Highness’s condition, it is possible that something has drained away his fortune. In other words, as people often say, he’s under the oppressive aura of someone with an ironclad fate.”

“Someone with an ironclad fate?” Princely Consort Rui frowned. “Can you divine who it might be, Master?”

Mobei seemed to hesitate.

Lady Xiao told the handmaiden standing nearby to bring over a tray of silver. “If you can divine the source of this, you would not want for incense offerings.”

Mobei glanced at the silver in the plate, and only then did her tongue loosen. “It will take some time to divine where these things are coming from. Why not light a few everlasting lamps at the nunnery for now, Your Highness? It will give you peace for the time being.”

As Jing Chen returned from morning court, he saw several nuns standing in the main courtyard, and when they noticed him, they all blushed and moved out of the way. Jing Chen frowned, and after thinking it over, he ultimately decided not to go inside; instead, he turned around and went straight to his study.

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A FEW DAYS LATER, First Prince Jing Rong returned to the imperial court.

It was nothing so glorious as Jing Shao’s triumphant return. A prince deserting the battlefield before the war’s end was truly nothing to be proud of. Jing Rong only had a dozen or so of his trusted followers with him, and

they entered the city with their tails between their legs in the early morning while the city gates were sparsely populated.

He first reported in at the imperial study. Of course Emperor Hongzheng wasn't about to put on a pleasant face for him, but when Jing Rong went to greet the empress consort at the Rite of Luan Palace, she pulled him aside to fuss over him and ask about his health.

"Your little brother has been having such a hard time without you here in the capital," said the empress consort, bestowing upon Jing Rong a whole pile of restoratives. "It is good that you're back. You've lost so much weight—the war must have been so hard on you. Now that you're back, you should take some time off to recuperate."

Jing Rong's complexion did not look good at all, and there was a sickly pallor to his cheeks. Ever since he'd been afflicted by miasma in the past year, then had contracted a serious illness, his health had been deteriorating day after day. If he hadn't come back, he would likely have died in Yunnan-Tibet.

The first prince had returned, yet Prince Cheng was under house arrest, so the number of princes at court was once more down to three—but the tides had shifted.

Since Prince Cheng was confined to his estate, Mu Hanzhang had to attend court every morning on his own, leaving Jing Shao with nothing to do at home other than to torment his tiger. He'd tried to persuade his consort not to go to morning court several times but was heartlessly rejected. What displeased him even more was that since he was at home, Duofu would come consult him about anything that was difficult to deal with. That he as an imperial prince was reduced to dealing with the minutiae of running a household made him truly furious.

Which meant that Li'l Sunbeam's life became even harder.

Chapter 92:
Clouds Surge

WHEN MU HANZHANG came home from morning court, he found Jing Shao practicing swordplay vigorously in the east wing, with Li'l Sunbeam nowhere in sight. Li'l Sunbeam was a tiger, after all, so even if he was rather spineless in front of the two of them, he was quite ferocious to outsiders. That was why Mu Hanzhang never allowed him to play outside of the east wing lest he hurt anyone.

Noticing that his consort was back, Jing Shao went over to him at once, turning up his sweat-drenched face, and waiting for his consort to wipe him down.

Mu Hanzhang took the towel Zhixi handed him and wiped Jing Shao's brow, as was his lot. "Where's Li'l Sunbeam?"

"No idea," Jing Shao said, so comfortable that his eyes had turned to slits. "He didn't want to play with me, so I'm guessing he ran off somewhere to sleep."

A little worried, Mu Hanzhang asked Yun Zhu to go look for him.

They sat down on the long daybed under the covered corridor, and Miaoxi brought over some cold sour plum soup, good for warding off the summer heat.

"How come you got back so late today?" Jing Shao downed a whole bowl of sour plum soup and let out a sigh of relief.

He eyed those long legs with longing, sidling over as he spoke. When Mu Hanzhang wasn't watching, he quickly laid his head down atop them.

Mu Hanzhang had just put down the little bowl when he noticed the extra big head that suddenly appeared on top of his thighs. Jing Shao had become even more clingy, kissing and hugging him whenever he had the chance, perhaps because he'd been cooped up at home for days.

Helplessly, Mu Hanzhang stroked the top of Jing Shao's head, then moved back a little so Jing Shao could get more comfortable. "Father kept

me behind to speak with him in the imperial study."

Emperor Hongzheng seemed rather interested in maritime trade. A few days ago, Mu Hanzhang had submitted his written regulations and hadn't heard anything back. But he was suddenly summoned today, and they discussed many of its more detailed aspects.

Jing Shao looked up at the graceful contour of Mu Hanzhang's jaw. "Well, then it looks like Father really did read your proposal carefully."

"Mm-hmm, perhaps Father has long planned on doing this."

Mu Hanzhang carefully reflected on the look on Emperor Hongzheng's face earlier today. It had seemed he was quite interested in this development. There were ports in Jiangnan where ships from across the sea would dock, so perhaps in a little while, when they were in Jiangnan, they could try their hand at this business.

"Your Highness, this is bad!" Yun Zhu said, having rushed in anxiously.

Mu Hanzhang frowned. "What's the matter?" Yun Zhu had just gone to search for the tiger—had Li'l Sunbeam gotten himself into some trouble?

"I asked around for ages before I found out that Li'l Sunbeam's run into the stables!" said Yun Zhu.

"What?" Jing Shao sat up at once.

Li'l Sunbeam wasn't quite so little anymore; he was big enough to scare those tame horses in the stables out of their wits with a single roar. All the horses in the estate were fine steeds, and it would be a painful loss to see any one of them dying from fright.

The two hastily followed Yun Zhu to the stables. Looking as if someone had just died, the stable hand stood outside, trembling with fear.

"What happened? Where's the tiger?" Jing Shao asked him.

"He's— He's in Shadow's stall."

The stable hand was nearly in tears. When he saw the tiger, he got so scared that his legs turned to lead and he could do nothing but watch as the beast ducked into Shadow's stall.

Because Shadow was Prince Cheng’s beloved horse, he had always been kept separate from the other horses, and his stable was much more spacious. His stall even had two tasteful low walls, and Shadow’s lead was quite long to make sure he could roam freely inside it.

Mu Hanzhang started to walk toward Shadow’s stable. But Jing Shao actually breathed a sigh of relief when he heard that and followed his consort inside without hurry.

The stable was very clean, its floor covered in soft, dry straw. There was fresh fodder in the feed trough, and a bamboo pipe had been set above the horse’s trough from which trickled a steady stream of clean water. The overflow was caught by the outer trough and drained outside the stable. There was no hint of horse manure at all, no doubt because the stall was cleaned several times a day.

Shadow was curled up on a haystack, swishing his tail in boredom. A half-grown, furry tiger cub was pressed up right next to him; he was out cold, hugging a hoof, his limbs splayed in all directions as he slept.

Suddenly, everyone fell silent.

Shadow was rather happy to see his master and stood up immediately, thinking that Jing Shao was taking him out somewhere to play.

Jing Shao was also rendered speechless by the scene before him. He’d always known that Shadow was different—not only was he able to avoid obstacles on his own, but he had no fear of ferocious beasts either. No matter what happened on a battlefield, Jing Shao had never seen him startled. And since Li’l Sunbeam was so well-fed, Jing Shao hadn’t been worried about their meeting at all. However, that a horse and a tiger could sleep in the same bed was beyond his comprehension.

Having lost his hugging pillow, Li’l Sunbeam groggily stood up, then unhappily shook his head. When he turned and saw Mu Hanzhang, he ran over to his side, winding around his legs and rubbing against him.

It was coincidentally now the hour of High Noon; because Shadow’s stable was so much work, the stable hands switched shifts halfway through the day. So when the afternoon stable hand came to start his shift, he saw a bunch of people around the stables and thought something must have happened to Shadow.

He ran over in a panic to see what was wrong. When they told him what had happened, he mustered up his courage and said, “Your Highness, there’s no need to worry. The cub comes to play with Shadow often. They already know each other quite well.”

As it turned out, when Li’l Sunbeam couldn’t find a suitable playmate in the estate, he had sneaked out of the east wing once and slipped inside the stable, jumping onto the trough to play with Shadow’s mane, only to have the horse snort hot air in his face. That’d scared him so much that he nearly fell. But when Li’l Sunbeam discovered that Shadow was the only living creature in the estate that wasn’t afraid of him, he often came to play with Shadow in the afternoon.

“Raah-ah?” Noticing that his owner wasn’t paying attention to him, he ran back to Shadow’s side to try to catch his swishing tail. Shadow, anxious to go out and play, stomped his legs and turned around, blowing a puff of hot air right into Li’l Sunbeam’s face, leaving a little swirl in the fur on top of his head.

Li’l Sunbeam usually came to the stable in the afternoon; the only reason he’d caused so much trouble for everyone today was because he’d run over in the morning. Mu Hanzhang turned to Jing Shao. This guy must have teased the tiger so badly that he drove the little guy to the stables to seek refuge.

Looking a bit guilty, Jing Shao turned his eyes away. “It’s not my fault. I was just bored and played with him for a bit.”

Mu Hanzhang breathed out a sigh. He was raised in the inner harem, so if he was the one who had been asked to stay in the estate for ten days or a fortnight, he’d be fine, either writing or reading to pass the time. But Jing Shao was different, and asking him to lock himself away in the estate was truly hard on him.

“I’ve already spoken to Father. I’ll need time to draw up the regulations in detail, so Father has already excused me from my other duties. From now on, I’ll come home right after morning court.”

“Really?” Jing Shao brightened up immediately.

While he was away from court, Emperor Hongzheng had somehow handed over Jing Shao’s duties at the Ministry of War to Mu Hanzhang as

well, and since his consort was someone who took his work seriously, he often came home just to eat lunch before leaving for the Ministry of War and staying there all afternoon. If he just had to go to court, then all Jing Shao had to do to see his consort again was to open his eyes after taking a morning nap.

His visible happiness caused a smile to tug at Mu Hanzhang's lips. There was another reason he chose not to involve himself in the politics of the court—since King Huainan was discovered by Emperor Hongzheng to have entered the capital without permission, Emperor Hongzheng had sent an edict of rebuke, yet there had been no response. King Huainan seemed not to care, as if he were a dead pig that had no fear of boiling water, and it made Emperor Hongzheng so furious that the tone of his official correspondence grew more stern with every letter; it seemed the day he called for the abolition of the feudatory would be coming any day now.

In regard to Gu Huaiqing entering the capital and getting in contact with Jing Shao, Emperor Hongzheng seemed unable to let it go. After some deliberation with Jing Chen, they decided that it was best for Mu Hanzhang to keep a low profile in the meantime, which meant he'd best avoid going somewhere as sensitive as the Ministry of War if he could. Of course, to Jing Shao, this was the best thing ever.

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BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, the Seventh Month had arrived. As the weather grew hotter, tensions at court began to mount. Jiangnan was of vital importance to Jing Shao, Jing Chen, and Mu Hanzhang, while Jing Yu had long since set his sights on this as an opportunity to distinguish himself. The decree to abolish the feudatory hadn't yet been issued, but both sides were already locked in a fierce struggle over it. Since Jing Shao still hadn't been released, the situation seemed quite favorable for the fourth prince.

While all this was happening, Lady Qiu was nearing her expected delivery date.

“I heard the little prince at the Prince Rui Estate is ill again. Have you been by to see him?” Lady Qiu asked with some concern as she accepted the fresh fruit her son handed her.

As Mu Hanzhang was a man, and with so many rules to follow in an imperial family, Lady Qiu had always worried that her son might not handle the relationship well and end up damaging the harmony between him and his sister-in-law.

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together. “How did you know about that, Mother?”

It was taboo to speak of a child’s illness outside of a family before they came of age. Knowing Princely Consort Rui, she was not one to let this slip to other people. Mother never stepped out of the house, so how did she ever find out about this?

“Third Madam went to Jadecloud Nunnery to make an incense offering, but Master Mobei wasn’t there. According to a young nun, she’d gone to the Prince Rui Estate again.” Lady Qiu sighed.

Raising a child wasn’t easy; it was one thing if a child was healthy, but the ones that got sick often were enough to break your heart with worry. However, it certainly wasn’t good for Princely Consort Rui to put so much faith in that Mobei.

Mobei had cajoled Princely Consort Rui into lighting forty-nine everlasting lamps at the Jadecloud Nunnery. The lamp wicks alone cost forty-nine taels of silver every month, and every time Third Madam came back from offering incense, she’d click her tongue and sigh about it for ages.

“The child is still little, so I worry that going to see him would be inappropriate.” Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips. “Besides, there are so many things to do at court, and His Highness is still under house arrest. It’s not proper for me to visit the Prince Rui Estate.”

A little while ago, the old nun had divined that the aura oppressing Xiao-Si was coming from the common son who was born just a few days before he was, so Princely Consort Rui said she wanted to send the common son away to be raised at the villa. When Jing Chen found out, he was deeply annoyed and told her that she was being delusional. His princely

concubine was clever enough, however, and knelt before him and asked that she be allowed to take the child to the villa herself. At this time, they'd already been there for more than a month.

Lady Qiu frowned after she found out about this. "Then you'd better not go." Now that the common-born son wasn't there anymore, and Xiao-Si was still running a fever, there was no telling whom she'd blame for his illness. It was best not to invite trouble upon himself.

Mu Hanzhang advised her not to spend time worrying about other people. He was exceedingly mindful of his mother's health, for childbirth could be dangerous at her age, so once they found out about her pregnancy, he'd spent a large sum to hire a famous midwife to stay at the Beiwei Estate. In order to prevent any accidents, Doctor Jiang's consultations had also increased in frequency from every seven days to every three days.

All the women in the Beiwei Estate inwardly marveled at this treatment, sighing at how having a marquis for a son sure made all the difference. Even when Marquise Beiwei was pregnant, she was never looked after with such care.

In the middle of the Seventh Month, the imperial court and King Huainan finally broke with one another. Emperor Hongzheng issued an imperial edict to abolish the last feudatory, and Gu Huaiqing simply barred the envoy from entering the city, reducing him to announcing the imperial edict in front of the gates. And once the envoy was done, Gu Huaiqing declared that he was defying the edict and scared the envoy so much that he turned his horse right back around and fled.

Enraged, Emperor Hongzheng decided to send troops against Huainan.

Chapter 93:
The Contenders

JING YU PACED in the Rite of Luan Palace. “Jiangnan is all flat land, with basically no natural defenses around Huainan. This campaign is just merit for the taking! Mother, I must obtain the position of marshal on this campaign!”

The empress consort nodded. Now that Jing Yu was about to come of age, he needed to distinguish himself soon so that he could be granted a title in time for his adulthood ceremony.

“If I’d known how easy fighting Dongnan was going to be, I would have sent you.” She had heard from Emperor Hongzheng that King Dongnan was simply unlucky, killed by his own concubine. Jing Shao had taken Dongnan without expending the slightest effort.

Here in the Rite of Luan Palace, these two people were all fired up, worried that someone else might snatch the glory. And in the Beiwei Estate, the atmosphere was tense as well.

“How is it?” Mu Hanzhang hurried in and asked his father, who was sitting on one side of the room.

There was a deep furrow between Marquis Beiwei’s brows but an undeniable look of anticipation in his eyes. “It’s likely very soon.”

Watching the handmaidens hurrying in and out of the room in a frantic manner, listening to the cries of pain that came intermittently out of the inner chamber, Mu Hanzhang clasped his hands together, but he had no idea what he could do.

When Jing Shao, who’d insisted on coming along, saw how nervous his consort was, he went over immediately to embrace him. “Don’t worry. I heard the second birth always goes smoothly. When my mother gave birth to me, she apparently didn’t have to work very hard at all.”

Mu Hanzhang glanced at him. “How would you know that?”

“That’s what everyone in the palace said. Allegedly, as soon as the midwife and the imperial physician went inside, it wasn’t even a quarter of an hour before they heard my cry,” said Jing Shao proudly.

“Your Highness must have been so thin,” said the third madam, who had come to see what was going on and couldn’t help interjecting.

Mu Hanzhang shot a glance at his third aunt with her fawning smile, then looked back at Jing Shao. As if he hadn’t heard what Third Madam said at all, Jing Shao simply kept trying to make his consort smile. “That’s why Father said I’m a lucky star, bound to bring favorable weather to the Chen Empire.”

The nine variations of the Xiao-Shao melody heralded the arrival of the phoenix. Perhaps a young Emperor Hongzheng did indeed like this son very much, Mu Hanzhang thought in a daze. It was hard to imagine Jing Shao being skinny and small as a child, though.

“Then what did you look like when you were little?”

“I was really chubby.” Jing Shao puffed up his cheeks, trying hard to show Mu Hanzhang what he’d look like fat.

Mu Hanzhang finally laughed aloud and reached out to poke one puffed-up cheek. The odd, top-heavy feeling that came with being so tense also disappeared.

Ignored, Third Madam sat back down awkwardly.

After Mu Hanzhang waited anxiously for a long time, Jing Shao worried that his consort would get tired from standing and pulled him over to lean against himself. For the first time, Mu Hanzhang did not refuse this show of public intimacy. Although he wasn’t as nervous anymore, he still couldn’t help feeling scared inside.

For women, childbirth was like passing by the gates of hell; he couldn’t imagine what he would do if something happened to his mother. The steady arms around his waist and the warm chest pressed against his back gave him immense courage, as if there were nothing for him to fear even if the sky fell down on them.

A bright, ringing cry suddenly broke the silence that pervaded the room. Marquis Beiwei sprang up from his seat, but he wasn’t allowed to go

in, so he could only pace back and forth in front of the door to the inner chamber.

The midwife came out beaming. “Congratulations, Your Lordship. It’s a boy!”

“Really?!” Mu Jin suddenly seemed several years younger, and the usual calmness on his face was replaced by a smile he could not conceal.

Jing Shao patted the man in his arms, who was extremely excited, and asked, “Is Madam Qiu doing okay?”

“Madam Qiu is perfectly fine,” the midwife immediately said. “Thanks to the last six months of meticulous care, she is in excellent health.”

Mu Hanzhang let out a sigh of relief, and only then did a smile appear on his face. Jing Shao took advantage of the fact that no one was watching to quickly plant a kiss on the corner of his smiling mouth.

Soon, the midwife went inside and brought out the freshly washed baby. Mu Jin took the soft little bundle rather excitedly, and the Prince Cheng couple also leaned in for a curious glance. The tiny little face was all scrunched up, flushed red with its eyes closed, so it was impossible to tell what the baby even looked like.

But Third Madam loudly praised, “What a handsome little boy, exactly like Hanzhang when he was a baby!”

Marquise Beiwei’s expression had darkened as soon as she heard that it was a boy, and the look on her face grew even more unpleasant when she heard what Third Madam said.

Jing Shao stared at this fresh-out-of-the-oven brother-in-law for a long while but still couldn’t tell how there was any resemblance between the baby and his consort. Actually, his scrunched-up face looked a bit like Duofu, but he didn’t dare say that aloud.

Mu Hanzhang glanced at Marquise Beiwei, who had yet to reward the servants, and said with a smile, “Father, you haven’t given my younger brother a name yet.”

“Let’s call him Longlin!” Mu Jin laughed heartily, then lifted his youngest son up to look at him some more, and just thought he looked

perfect in every way.

He would be the last to be named after the sacred relics: *Of the spirit-borne Lingmo daggers, first called Longlin, the Dragonscale.*

Mu Hanzhang nodded. Once he was grown, his courtesy name could be “Lingmo,” and that sounded cultured and pleasant enough on the tongue. Longlin, however, sounded a little stiff, so they could simply call him Lin-er.

When the servants realized what they needed to do now, they all hurried forward to offer their congratulations.

Marquis Beiwei said happily, “Five taels of silver for each and every one!”

“Thank you, Your Lordship!” The servants immediately beamed with joy.

Whenever someone was born to the Beiwei Estate, a girl meant one tael each, and a boy two taels each. Indeed, this young master was the most favored of them all.

Marquise Beiwei almost tore the handkerchief in her hand in half when she heard that. She’d deliberately stalled just so the servants could get a good look at who was the true mistress of the house. She never thought that Marquis Beiwei would speak up before she managed to, and the men of the Mu clan simply had no idea how much they were supposed to reward the servants!

Without betraying how he felt, Mu Hanzhang glanced at Marquise Beiwei, and thought to himself that, since he would be leaving for Jiangnan soon, he must charge Ge Ruoyi with Lin-er’s safety.

On the way back to their estate, the smile never left Mu Hanzhang’s face. Seeing how happy he was, Jing Shao’s eyes also curved up in a smile. “If you don’t want Lin-er to inherit the Marquis Beiwei peerage, you can actually just let him inherit yours instead.”

Mu Hanzhang shook his head. “That won’t do. It’s not as if the title of Marquis Wenyuan is hereditary.”

His younger brother had just been born, so there was no way to know what path he might take in life. It was far too early to say anything now. Mu

Hanzhang was happy as long as he could grow up safe and sound.

Obviously, the joyful atmosphere at the Beiwei Estate did not extend to the halls of the imperial court. As soon as he stepped through the palace gates the next day, Marquis Beiwei immediately put away the smile on his face and stepped into the palace, serene as a placid lake.

At the very mention of launching an attack against Jiangnan, Jing Yu eagerly stepped forward. “Father, your son would like to go!”

“Even though Huainan is not as expansive as Xinan, the land is fertile and rich,” said the minister of war, frowning. “King Huainan has inherited generations of resources, and his army is well-equipped. He could be a tough opponent.”

“Then in your opinion, Minister Sun, whom should we send?” Emperor Hongzheng’s gaze was dark and inscrutable, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

“This one believes that the Huainan Fiefdom is extremely important. To be on the safe side, Prince Cheng should be sent there,” the minister of war said without hesitation.

“This one believes that although the fourth prince is young, he is calm and decisive, capable of shouldering great responsibilities. There is nothing wrong with sending the fourth prince,” said the minister of justice, stepping forward.

Mu Hanzhang glanced quietly at Jing Chen and continued to keep his eyes down, not saying a word.

“The fourth prince is about to come of age, so he should of course go through some trials. In this one’s opinion, this Huainan rebellion is actually a good opportunity!” Since the loquacious Earl Yongchang had been sent off to Yunnan-Tibet, Duke Mao had to speak up himself. Given his status, such remarks did not seem jarring.

Suddenly, the court was embroiled in heated dispute. Emperor Hongzheng remained silent and said nothing, and when the time was almost up, he rose.

“That will be all for today. We will discuss this matter again tomorrow.” Then he left with a swish of his sleeves.

For now, the assembled court officials were unable to tell what Emperor Hongzheng wanted. News from Jiangnan had reached the imperial court days ago, and His Majesty had yet to lift Prince Cheng's house arrest, so they were all guessing that he'd decided not to send Prince Cheng. However, judging by the way morning court had gone today, he seemed to have no plans to send the fourth prince either.

After leaving the Grand Hall, one official whispered to another, "Could it be that His Majesty is waiting for Prince Cheng to apologize?"

The other one frowned. "What exactly did Prince Cheng do wrong anyway?"

"I heard he lost his temper and talked back to His Majesty a couple of times." The speaker glanced around. "If you ask me, Prince Cheng is still His Majesty's favorite. The fourth prince has gone as far as to offer to go today, and yet he still didn't manage to get a straight answer."

When Jing Yu passing by on the high terrace above heard the discussion below, his hands clenched into tight fists, and he turned and headed to the Rite of Luan Palace.

Mu Hanzhang and Jing Chen exchanged a knowing glance, and both turned to leave.

Marquis Beiwei was still basking in the joy of having a son in his old age. "Hanzhang, do you want to come back with me to see your little brother?"

"Father," Mu Hanzhang responded, then he shot him a look.

Marquis Beiwei realized his lapse in decorum and quickly suppressed his smile. "What are His Highness's intentions regarding this campaign against Huainan?"

Mu Hanzhang heaved a sigh. "His Highness is on the verge of climbing the walls, he's so restless. He's hoping that his house arrest will be lifted because of this."

When a couple of officials heard him, they exchanged a look, but when Marquis Beiwei looked up, they put their heads down and left in a hurry.

That night, Emperor Hongzheng stayed at the Rite of Luan Palace.

The empress consort carefully helped Emperor Hongzheng remove his outer robes. “Your Majesty, Yu-er is about to come of age, but he hasn’t yet made any notable contributions. Two of his elder brothers have already been crowned as imperial princes, so it’s about time we give him a chance to gain some experience.”

When she recalled how her son had stormed about in that angry, desperate way today, she couldn’t help frowning. Jing Yu was placing too much importance on this, and perhaps it was precisely because His Majesty looked down upon that overeager attitude of his that he was unwilling to give his consent.

“An imperial prince title?” Emperor Hongzheng glanced at the empress consort. “Jing Rong hasn’t been titled yet either, no? What’s the rush?”

How is that the same thing? The empress inwardly clenched her teeth, yet outwardly her face still bore a gentle smile. “At the very least, Jing Yu is legitimate born. Even though seniority matters, there is still the distinction between the legitimate and common born.”

Emperor Hongzheng’s expression immediately turned cold at her words. “There is a *distinction* between the legitimate and common born?”

The empress’s heart almost leaped out of her throat. Had she said something wrong? Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind, and she broke out in a fearful cold sweat. “Of course, the imperial family has little regard for such a rule. This one has misspoken.”

Emperor Hongzheng himself was not legitimate born; there was nothing he hated to hear more than the idea of this distinction between legitimate and common-born sons. He cast a cold glance at the empress consort, who kept her head lowered. Back when the late empress was alive, she had treated all of the children with equal kindness, regardless of the status of their birth.

“I merely believe that after Prince Cheng returned from defeating two vassal kings in a row, he has become rather conceited. Now, he even dares talk back to Your Majesty. If he’s released merely because we need him to fight a war, it would likely…” The empress cautiously glanced at Emperor Hongzheng’s expression without finishing her sentence, but the meaning behind her words was easy enough to follow.

This time, Emperor Hongzheng said nothing; he merely fixed an intense gaze on the empress for a moment before turning to walk toward the bed. “If Jing Yu wants to go to war, tell him to come tell me himself tomorrow morning.”

“Certainly,” said the empress consort, her eyes lighting up.

She quickly sent word to Jing Yu so that he would come wait at the Rite of Luan Palace before morning court, and she also instructed her chief eunuch to open the side door for him.

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“I HEARD A MESSAGE was sent from the palace last night telling the fourth prince to go to the Rite of Luan Palace before dawn,” Mu Hanzhang said to Jing Shao as he tied the sash to his inner robe. He turned then and glanced at him and suddenly went red in the face. “You— You should at least put some clothes on.”

It was sweltering. Jing Shao got out of bed to help his consort get dressed, and since it wasn’t as if anyone else was around, he boldly walked around naked, letting it all hang out.

When he saw a blush coloring Junqing’s handsome face, he couldn’t help saying proudly, “What are you being so shy about? Not like you haven’t seen it before.”

Chapter 94:
Morning Court

"YOU'RE…" MU HANZHANG was so angry that he couldn't speak. Even though they were husband and wife, this was far too bold and impulsive to do in broad daylight.

Jing Shao could not have loved his shy and vexed expression more and did not resist his impulse to lean in and kiss those tightly pursed lips. His voice hoarse from arousal, he said, "Junqing, don't go to court today."

Mu Hanzhang pushed him away, diligently fastening the jade-trimmed belt of his court attire. "I have to. This is a decisive meeting."

Jing Shao stood with his arms crossed and waited idly for him to finish tying his belt. When Mu Hanzhang looked over at him, confused at why his prince had gone so quiet, Jing Shao suddenly reached out, picked him up, and tossed him onto the bed.

Mu Hanzhang grunted in surprise and tried to get up immediately. "What are you doing?!"

"Junqing, I believe that you've grown forgetful of your duty since you were ennobled." Jing Shao straddled that strong, narrow waist. The jade on the belt pressed against his thigh, bringing a refreshing coolness to his skin.

"Stop fooling around or I'm going to be late." Mu Hanzhang was starting to panic a little—this morning court was the critical moment where they would decide whom to send to Huainan. He had to attend.

"See? You really have forgotten," said Jing Shao angrily and began to take apart Mu Hanzhang's elaborate court attire. The elegant robes encased him in layers, and he felt like a child unwrapping a present, each layer bringing him another wave of euphoria.

"You bastard, I have to go! Ah…" Mu Hanzhang struggled and tried to get up, but alas, the difference in strength between himself and Jing Shao

was simply too great. He was quickly subdued by His Highness, the valiant Prince Cheng.

As Jing Shao entered him, he said earnestly, “Remember, you are Princely Consort Cheng first, and Marquis Wenyuan second. Fulfilling your husband’s requests takes priority over attending morning court.”

Mu Hanzhang tightened his grip on the bedsheets beneath him. “Why you…mm…”

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JING YU WAITED OUTSIDE the Rite of Luan Palace for a long time, and even as the chief eunuch tried to persuade him to get some rest in a side chamber, he insisted on waiting outside the doors. His clothes were already covered in dew.

He’d heard that when Jing Shao wanted to join the army, he’d knelt on the marble steps for a full day. Now that he wanted to lead troops, of course he had to show the same degree of sincerity.

Once Emperor Hongzheng had finished dressing, the empress consort tactfully reminded him that Jing Yu had been waiting outside for a long time.

“In what way do you think you’re better than Jing Shao?” Emperor Hongzheng asked, glancing down once at the fourth prince’s dew-beaded robes, a barely discernible trace of chill surfacing in his eyes.

“Third Brother is a military genius. Your son dares not claim to match him,” Jing Yu said humbly from his kneeling position on the floor.

Emperor Hongzheng scoffed. “You have some self-awareness, at least.”

Jing Yu choked on that comment. He had meant to say something humble and never thought that Father would casually affirm his words as fact. Though he did not agree, he did not dare to show it; this moment was an opportunity his mother had fought for, and he had to give Father a reason he must be the one to go to Jiangnan.

Jing Yu took a deep breath to calm himself. “I cannot hope to compare myself to Third Brother, but I will soon be of age. And like my brothers, I too wish to render meritorious service to the empire and prove myself, just like my brothers have.”

The empress consort chimed in, “Indeed, Your Majesty. Experience on the battlefield can only be gained through trials.”

“Trials?” Emperor Hongzheng slammed the cup he had been raising on the table. “What do you think Jiangnan is? You think it’s a place Jing Yu can use for *practice*?”

“Father, please quell your anger!” The fourth prince kowtowed at once, knowing that this reason wasn’t enough to persuade Emperor Hongzheng. He gritted his teeth and threw all caution to the wind. “Your son has something to report!”

Emperor Hongzheng gestured for him to continue, so the fourth prince recounted what he knew about Jing Shao’s meeting with King Huainan, mixing truth with fabrication: “If Third Brother is truly collu—connected to King Huainan, then if he is sent to this conflict, I fear…”

Emperor Hongzheng watched him quietly for a moment. “Did you see this meeting between the two of them with your own eyes?”

The fourth prince did not have sufficient evidence. He’d heard everything from Zhao Jiulin secondhand, so he did not dare declare it so firmly. “Um, when your son led a group there to intercept him, the room was already deserted. Your son only got the information.”

“And who gave you this information?” Emperor Hongzheng stared intently at the fourth prince, his gaze growing sharp. “We were not aware that there was anyone in the imperial court who would give you information privately without reporting it to us first.”

“Um…” Jing Yu found himself instantly drenched in a cold sweat—in his eagerness to smear Jing Shao, he’d forgotten that there was nothing his father hated more than princes forming alliances with court officials. He gritted his teeth and pressed on. “It’s Vice Minister of Rites Zhao Jiulin. He’s from Jiangnan, and when he came to the capital to take his metropolitan exams, King Huainan was the one who financed his trip, which is why he pretends to be loyal to him. I merely ran into Zhao Jiulin

by chance on the street. He said he thought he saw King Huainan heading to the peach garden in the south side of the city, and…and he saw that the carriage from the Prince Cheng Estate was there as well.” He didn’t dare look up after he said all this and kept his eyes on the intricately patterned carpet beneath his knees.

Emperor Hongzheng stayed silent, two fingers drumming on the table again and again. Suddenly, he swept all the cups off the table. “What’s the use of keeping around someone who bites the hand that feeds them?!”

Not only the fourth prince but even the empress consort herself was caught off guard. She dropped to her knees and dared not make a sound.

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JING SHAO SLOWED DOWN and said to poor Duofu who had to stand outside the door, “Go to the palace and let them know that Marquis Wenyuan is unwell today and cannot attend morning court.”

“No…mm—” Before Mu Hanzhang could finish speaking, the man atop him glanced downward and wickedly ground against that sensitive spot inside him, making it hard for him to speak. And he was so worried that the servants outside might hear them that he could only bite his lower lip to keep himself quiet.

Duofu responded at once, then quickly sent away the handmaidens who were here for the morning rituals and breakfast before he rushed away to take care of other things.

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THE MAIN FOCUS of today’s court assembly remained on the Huainan fiefdom, and a huge argument had broken out over whom they should send. Jing Chen remained silent the entire time; he hadn’t said a

word since the assembly began. The first prince had just recovered from his illness, and he still looked somewhat sickly standing there.

Emperor Hongzheng also seemed disinclined to hear his sons speak; it wasn't until the court officials who strongly recommended the fourth prince listed various reasons why it had to be him that Emperor Hongzheng finally said slowly, "Permission granted."

A moment's silence came over the court before what he said sank in. Fourth Prince Jing Yu forcefully suppressed the joy that came over his face and kowtowed respectfully. "Your son will do his utmost to help Father subdue Huainan!"

Anyone who was paying attention could tell that the fourth prince thought Jiangnan's flat terrain made it vulnerable to assault and difficult to hold, so he thought he'd just walk in and grab himself an imperial prince title. Meanwhile, the hardworking and accomplished Prince Cheng was still confined to his estate, which allowed the fourth prince to swoop in and take it out from under him. They couldn't help feeling a bit sympathetic. Some of the court officials acquainted with Mu Hanzhang even wanted to offer some words of comfort, only to realize that Marquis Wenyuan was surprisingly absent on such an important occasion.

And Marquis Wenyuan, who had been forcibly stripped out of his court attire by his prince and was thus unable to attend morning court, was somehow, by accident, able to dodge all of the sympathetic or derisive small talk from everyone.

With the fourth prince set to march on Jiangnan, the tides had turned, and the empress consort finally breathed a sigh of relief. She even seemed much more cordial toward the harem concubines she usually disapproved of. The fourth prince was of course full of pride and ambition, spending his days ardently preparing for his expedition, and his estate started to see a steady stream of visitors.

In contrast, the Prince Cheng and Marquis Beiwei estates seemed more than a little deserted.

Chapter 95:
Conspiracy

"XIAO-SI PASSED AWAY?"

Jing Shao was so shocked by these words that he sprang to his feet.

Duofu scrunched up his face. "It's already been reported to the palace."

"No, I must head to the Prince Rui Estate!" Jing Shao said, running off to change his clothes.

Mu Hanzhang held him back. "You're still under house arrest; how are you supposed to go? I'll go instead."

The fourth prince was leaving for the expedition tomorrow. If Jing Shao chose this occasion to ignore an order from the emperor and run out of his residence, there was no telling what unpleasant rumors might end up spreading.

Jing Shao fell silent, his hands slowly clenching into fists. How could he have forgotten? In his past life, he was still out fighting a war in the fourteenth year of Hongzheng and did not hear about his brother having a fourth son. He'd assumed that his own rebirth had caused some changes to the world, but now that he thought about it, perhaps the second son he had in the sixteenth year of Hongzheng had been born earlier instead—and that legitimate-born second son never managed to survive to his first birthday. He was recuperating in the capital at the time and did not visit his brother when he heard the news. It was from that point onward that his relationship with his brother began to get even more strained.

"No, I must go." Ignoring everyone's attempt to dissuade him, Jing Shao got up and headed toward the inner chamber.

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips, then quickly wrote a memorial and handed it to Duofu. "Bring it to the palace at once."

Duofu acknowledged the order and hurried out with the memorial, his usually clumsy short legs working with surprising speed. He was once a

eunuch of the palace, so aside from the two masters of the Prince Cheng Estate, he was the only one who could enter the palace without being summoned. If this memorial needed to reach His Majesty, he would have to deliver it himself.

Mu Hanzhang stared at Duofu's retreating silhouette and shook his head. Apparently, this guy wasn't *incapable* of moving quickly, he was simply lazy, which was why he usually moved at that plodding pace.

After changing, Jing Shao picked up his princely consort and mounted Shadow, then rode out at a gallop.

The Prince Rui Estate was not far from the Prince Cheng Estate. Before long, they arrived at its gates. The bodyguards at the gate hurried forward to bow to them, and the steward of the outer court rushed to greet them.

As Jing Shao tossed the reins to a servant, he strode inside. "Where's my brother?"

"His Highness is in Princely Consort Rui's courtyard." The steward had a worried look on his face. When he noticed that Jing Shao was about to head right for the harem, he immediately stopped him and invited him to rest in the main courtyard instead, letting him know that Jing Chen would be out in a moment.

"No, I have to go in and check on him," Jing Shao said and kept going forward until Mu Hanzhang grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him back.

"You can't just walk into someone else's harem without permission!" Mu Hanzhang said, shooting him a glare. He grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the main residence where Jing Chen resided.

Since the rightful consort of the Prince Rui Estate was a woman, Jing Chen had his own quarters in his courtyard compound. The two of them sat down in its main hall, and once the handmaiden served them tea, she respectfully withdrew. Soon, Jing Chen walked in.

When he saw Jing Shao in the room, he seemed momentarily stunned, and the iciness in his expression faded quite a lot. "What are you two doing here?"

“When we heard what happened, His Highness just ran out without a second thought,” said Mu Hanzhang, powerlessly.

“Outrageous!” Jing Chen glared at Jing Shao and sat down with a swish of his sleeves.

Jing Shao shot a look at his wife, who had just ratted him out to his brother, and though he was seething, he wisely bit down on his tongue. “Brother, how did Xiao-Si pass away so suddenly?”

Jing Chen sighed and rubbed the furrow between his brows. “The doctor said he was born with a frail constitution, and with the persistent fever over the past few days, there was nothing to be done. He was gone early this morning.”

Mu Hanzhang was reminded of his mother telling him that Princely Consort Rui seemed to have been blindly putting her faith in an old nun and shot a look at Jing Shao. He was about to say something when there was a sudden commotion outside.

Princely Consort Rui rushed into the courtyard. Her hair was a mess, and she was trailed by a bunch of flustered-looking servants. When Lady Xiao saw Jing Shao as she walked through the door, she immediately stopped in her tracks and fixed an intense gaze upon him for a long moment.

“What more do you have to say for yourself?” Jing Chen said, looking coldly at Lady Xiao. He turned to the servants behind her and said, “What are you all standing around for? Hurry and bring her back to her quarters. Without This Prince’s orders, she is not permitted to take a single step out of her courtyard!”

“Your Highness!” Lady Xiao looked at Jing Chen in shock, but her upbringing did not allow her to scream. She was so angry, however, that she was trembling slightly as she stiffly turned away.

Jing Shao was quite confused by her glaring, having no idea what had happened. And Jing Chen had no plans to explain. He said to them, “Even if there is a reason for your presence, you two should hurry back. I will submit another memorial to Father.”

Jing Shao’s brow remained tightly furrowed all the way back home. What happened at the Prince Rui Estate was quite strange—why was Lady

Xiao glaring at him, and what did his brother mean when he said that to her?

When Mu Hanzhang noticed that Jing Shao's mind was wandering so much that Shadow was about to trot over to a vegetable stall to chew on their napa cabbage, he took the reins out of his hands and said to him, in a measured tone, "If I'm not mistaken, Princely Consort Rui must have complained about you to your brother."

When Jing Shao heard that, the furrow between his brows only grew deeper. "And what could she have complained about? That if I didn't go, then it's my fault that Xiao-Si's dead?" Judging by the look on his brother's face, it didn't seem like he suspected him of anything, but the way this sister-in-law was behaving was truly baffling to him.

"That's unlikely," said Mu Hanzhang, gently tapping his ankle against Shadow's belly to make him move a little faster. "Perhaps she said that his legitimate-born son had just passed away, and yet you, his very own brother, hadn't bothered showing up, and so on."

"At a time like this, she's concerned about etiquette?" Jing Shao was a bit surprised.

Her son had just passed away, and from the way she looked, Lady Xiao was extremely grief-stricken. Would she care about the etiquette of others at a time like this?

A sneer appeared on Mu Hanzhang's lips. Of course that wasn't what Lady Xiao was really thinking, but knowing how Jing Chen was, she would never dare say what she *was* thinking. All she could do was to pick a reasonable thing to criticize Jing Shao with.

"There's something fishy about all this. We must investigate it," Mu Hanzhang said.

Jing Shao nodded; he also wanted to know why Lady Xiao was so hostile toward him. It had been this way in his previous life too—their relationship now had somehow turned out the exact same. But back then, he'd blamed it all on his older brother, believing that her attitude was tied to what his brother wanted. Now that he could plainly see it all, he was even more determined to get to the bottom of it.

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FOURTH PRINCE JING YU marched out the next day, and Emperor Hongzheng personally went to the city gates to see him off. Clad in full armor, the fourth prince was in high spirits as he led his troops away, as if victory were already within sight.

Above the battlements of the tall city gates, Emperor Hongzheng watched the army gradually recede into the distance, his eyes dark.

"Your Majesty, we have gathered all the evidence of corruption and bribery committed by the vice minister of rites," said an official behind him quietly.

"Keep him locked away for now." Emperor Hongzheng's expression remained unchanged, but a calculated ruthlessness flashed in his eyes. "Question him and find out everything there is to know for Us."

"Certainly," the man said in acknowledgment and slowly withdrew.

Surprisingly, Emperor Hongzheng did not further pursue the matter of Prince Cheng disobeying his house arrest and running out of his estate. Since the imperial family had just lost a grandson, the court officials also did not dare make an issue of it, and they let the matter drop after a brief mention.

Without the fourth prince, things seemed far calmer at court. Emperor Hongzheng produced the maritime trade regulations as written by Mu Hanzhang and presented the proposal to the court.

As everyone debated on its merits, things started to liven up again. The conservative faction naturally opposed it, believing that it was a pointless fixation on trivial policies when they had more important things to work on. Some officials whose hometowns were in the southern coastal regions knew more about the subject, and quite a few of them actually thought it was a good idea. None of the higher-ranking officials said anything about it, choosing to take a copy back with them to read instead.

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“SHE’S DEAD?” Mu Hanzhang said in surprise, his eyes widening.

Jing Shao nodded. He’d done as his consort advised and investigated that old nun Mobei from the Jadecloud Nunnery, but by the time his men got there, the nun had already hanged herself in her room.

“*Nothing to see here*, indeed.” Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. If that was so, then what happened at the Prince Rui Estate must be connected to this nun. But now that she was dead, there was no one they could question even if they wanted to.

Jing Shao placed several pages of testimony and something wrapped in yellow paper on the table. “Here’s what they got questioning the younger nun.”

Curious, Mu Hanzhang picked up the sheets and read them. They detailed the number of times Mobei entered the Prince Rui Estate, as well as what she did while she was there. The young nun didn’t know much, mostly just about Mobei cajoling Princely Consort Rui into buying lamp wicks or paying for incense offerings. Mu Hanzhang could tell that this young nun Jing Shao snatched was likely one that served Mobei, but whenever Mobei spoke with Lady Xiao, she’d always kept the young nuns outside, so she didn’t actually know what Mobei told Lady Xiao.

“What is this?” Mu Hanzhang took the yellow packet and opened it to find some powder inside. It seemed to be incense ash or something close to it.

“That’s the ‘miracle cure’ Mobei gave Xiao-Si to take,” Jing Shao said with a sneer.

That young nun had thought the medicine her master gave an imperial grandson must be extraordinary, so she’d stolen a package when Mobei wasn’t paying attention. Jing Shao had confiscated it.

Mu Hanzhang poured half of the powder into a small porcelain bottle and wrapped the other half back in yellow paper. “Li’l Spoon, I don’t think we should keep this from Brother.”

Jing Shao frowned. He'd thought he should get to the bottom of this himself before telling him. After all, this was all just conjecture, and his brother must be heartbroken after losing his child. Wouldn't they just be stabbing him in the heart if they simply blabbered before their investigation had a clear answer?

Mu Hanzhang put the small porcelain bottle away, then stood up and took Jing Shao's hand, stuffing the yellow paper packet into his palm. "There's more to this than meets the eye. No matter what the person behind this is after, I'm sure that sowing discord between you and your brother is at least half of it."

Jing Shao's head snapped up. "What do you mean?"

"Whether or not this medicine is what killed Xiao-Si, we can't ask anyone to examine it." Mu Hanzhang took Jing Shao's hand. "Because if anyone finds it with us, we won't ever be able to explain ourselves. Listen to me. Hand over both this powder and that young nun to your brother."

They were on the crest of a wave, and if he didn't cherish the bond between himself and his brother, who else would willingly wade into this mess? With Jing Chen's wisdom, he would doubtlessly understand his little brother's sincere intentions. As long as they were of one mind, nothing else mattered.

Jing Shao stared blankly as Mu Hanzhang explained all this to him, his hand gradually tightening around the yellow packet in his hand. If he still allowed others to sow discord between him and his brother in this second life, then he would have lived in vain.

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JING CHEN TOOK THE POWDER and testimony from him and said nothing for a long while. He sent Jing Shao an intent stare. "When she gave it to Xiao-Si, the imperial physician already examined it beforehand."

Jing Shao froze, then scratched his head. "I just found Mobei's death really suspicious, that's all. I haven't discovered anything else yet."

Jing Chen studied him quietly for a while, then he slowly reached out and patted Jing Shao on the head.

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HALF A MONTH PASSED before the fourth prince arrived in Jiangnan.

Jiangnan was flat and had few natural barriers, making it vulnerable to assault and difficult to hold; but Jing Yu had forgotten one thing: If he knew that, so did King Huainan. That was why, before the fourth prince's army even had time to finish setting up camp, the Huainan forces were already launching a preemptive attack on them.

Chapter 96:
Maritime Trade

UP IN THE WATCHTOWER, Gu Huaiqing looked down at the strutting fourth prince, a smile slowly creeping over his lips.

The generals next to him were all eager for action, eyeing the fourth prince like a pack of wolves who spotted a fatty slab of meat. “My lord, let me go. I’ll surely beat that brat so badly he shits his pants!”

“Shh.” Gu Huaiqing extended a slender index finger and placed it against his pale-pink lips. “This is a prince you’re looking at. You mustn’t talk in such a vulgar way.”

The general blinked. “My lord, how should I talk, then?”

Gu Huaiqing shot a look toward him and smacked him upside the head. “Enough talk! Lose and you won’t be getting any dinner tonight.”

“Understood!” Perfectly happy to take that smack, the general bolted downstairs like a shot.

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AS IT WAS STILL TOO EARLY for battle reports from Jiangnan to reach the capital, morning court turned its attention to matters of maritime trade.

Mu Hanzhang was speaking in the center of the Grand Hall. “There have always been maritime merchants. The previous dynasty enforced a trade embargo, yet it was repeatedly defied because merchants valued profit above all, and maritime trade was so lucrative that they were willing to risk their lives for it.” His voice wasn’t loud, yet his words were spoken with such clarity and calm that it was distinctly conveyed to everyone in the pin-dropping quiet of morning assembly. “This one believes that it is far more effective to channel the flow than to stem it.”

Several copies of Marquis Wenyuan’s draft had already been made, and read by all the high-ranking officials at court. It had detailed valuation of goods from the Chen Empire in foreign gold currency, and its most tempting aspect was the establishment of a maritime export tariff. With such generous profits, all the government had to do was establish ports and maintain order in order to collect a large sum in taxes. In this way, the annual tax revenue of the national treasury would increase by at least one tenth.

“This one believes that this policy is feasible.” The minister of revenue was the first to step forward in support. As the one in charge of managing the state treasury’s ledger, he knew how much benefit this could bring to the Chen Empire. “Successive wars over the past decade have caused a deficit in the treasury that needs to be filled. This maritime export tariff can address this pressing need.”

“Establishing ports will inevitably lead to spying by foreigners, and increasing military strength along the coast to protect maritime trade would be both time and resource intensive. This one believes that this matter requires further discussion,” said the minister of war, who did not seem to approve.

“If we permit maritime trade, it is imperative that we establish corresponding laws. Though these are also mentioned in Marquis Wenyuan’s proposal, this one does not believe that they are detailed enough,” said the minister of justice.

The minister of personnel voiced neither opposition nor agreement and merely raised the relevant issues under his responsibility. “If we want to open ports, corresponding government offices must also be established. All the official ranks and stipends for this office must be redefined.”

The only one who did not interject was the minister of rites, who silently stood in his place.

As he listened to their debate, Mu Hanzhang remained calm, showing no intention of backing down despite their numerous objections.

Emperor Hongzheng quietly finished listening to all of them before turning to the two princes who remained at court. “What do you think, Jing Rong?”

The first prince had fully recovered, his gaze now bright, and was just waiting for his chance to speak. At His Majesty’s question, he immediately stepped forward.

“Your son has carefully reviewed Marquis Wenyuan’s proposal and believes that a mere scholar such as Marquis Wenyuan speaking of such things as the ways of commerce is just empty theorizing. Since a trade embargo was put in place in the previous dynasty, they must have had good reason. I fear rashly opening ports might bring disaster.”

Mu Hanzhang’s brows drew together slightly. By putting it this way, the first prince was openly opposing the idea, and as many of the older officials at court held the same view, he could win the hearts of many of them by saying so. Sure enough, as soon as the first prince finished speaking, quite a few conservative older ministers stepped forward to speak.

Again, Emperor Hongzheng said nothing and asked for Prince Rui’s opinion.

Jing Chen stepped forward, and after a moment’s pause, he said, “Your son believes that if this policy is viable, it would be of great benefit to the Chen Empire. However, knowledge gained from books remains superficial without practice, so why not take what the other officials have already proposed, draft a provisional set of regulations, and open a single port as a trial? If it doesn’t work, the trade embargo can easily be restored.”

They had been debating this subject for several days, and what Jing Chen said served to satisfy both sides. Naturally, those who believed it would work couldn’t wait to see it succeed, while those who thought it would be a flop were just waiting for their chance to gloat.

Jing Rong had his head lowered, but he was looking at Mu Hanzhang out of the corner of his eye. “What Second Brother said is certainly true, but the one in charge of the port must carefully record every shortcoming of this plan. Your son believes that it would be best to appoint someone who is most knowledgeable in this matter.”

Mu Hanzhang did not speak and merely stood quietly. Of course, he understood what the first prince meant, and it aligned with his wishes, but it wasn’t the right time yet to act.

And indeed, Emperor Hongzheng did not respond to the first prince either when he made his ruling. “What Jing Chen said makes sense. Each department should draft a set of regulations within seven days as discussed and submit it to me for review.”

Mu Hanzhang did not remain to speak with the other officials after morning court ended, and he went straight back home in the estate’s carriage.

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“Your Highness.” Marquis Dingnan picked up his pace and caught up with Jing Chen in his moon-blue imperial prince attire.

“Your Lordship,” Jing Chen responded politely.

Noticing that Jing Chen still looked as composed and staid as ever, his expression calm and devoid of any enthusiasm, Marquis Dingnan felt compelled to make up for it by being even more enthusiastic. “I heard that my daughter is a little unwell lately. Her mother is quite worried and would like to come by the estate to see her, so she insisted that I come ask you when she might be available.”

Usually, socializing between womenfolk did not require reporting, but since Marquis Dingnan’s daughter had been put under house arrest by Prince Rui, this was of course just a tactful way of asking him for permission.

Reminded of Lady Xiao, Jing Chen resisted the urge to frown.

He said calmly, “Today will do. Princely Consort Rui has been overthinking things lately, so I ask Her Ladyship to please offer her some words of comfort and advice.”

At his words, Marquis Dingnan’s smile widened. “Of course.”

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MU HANZHANG SEEMED a little pale. Jing Shao had kept him up rather late last night, and this morning’s court assembly dragged on for too long; he’d been standing for almost four hours, and his entire body was aching. As he stepped into the carriage, he was encircled in a pair of strong arms.

Inside the carriage, the curtains were drawn, and it was quite dark. Mu Hanzhang was startled, but as he was pulled into a warm, familiar embrace, he slowly relaxed. “What are you doing here?”

Jing Shao settled Mu Hanzhang in his arms, instructed the coachman to drive on, and planted a kiss on that fatigued-looking face while he was at it. “Since you weren’t back yet, I figured this morning’s assembly must be running late, so I came to get you because I thought you might be tired.”

Mu Hanzhang shifted, found a comfortable position in his arms, and let out a little yawn. “If you knew I’d be tired, then you should have restrained yourself last night.”

Jing Shao reached down to massage his wife’s sore lower back, then snorted. “You can’t pin that on me. The way you looked at me last night was clearly begging me to do it again.” Whenever he thought of Junqing’s teary, reddened eyes, his mouth would suddenly go dry.

“Why, you…” Mu Hanzhang tried to glare at him, but alas, it was too dim in the carriage for it to have any effect.

Tired of dealing with him, he turned and buried his face in Jing Shao’s chest to get some sleep—out of sight, out of mind.

Jing Shao continued kneading at his flesh and squeezing him here and there, massaging him while getting some groping done at the same

time. “Brined Bird’s letter arrived today. He said that the house in Pingjiang is all ready for us.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mu Hanzhang responded blearily.

“As soon as Jing Yu got there, Gu Huaiqing taught him a good lesson. I wonder what he’s going to say in his battle reports, though.” Every time Jing Shao recalled the gloating tone of Lu Zhanpeng’s letter, he simply wanted to laugh. “How did the trade proposal go?”

“Brother already made his suggestion, and Father had each department draft up regulations, but they haven’t said where the first port would be yet.” Mu Hanzhang was so sleepy he could barely keep his eyes open. Even as he replied in clear and concise terms, he unconsciously nuzzled against Jing Shao’s chest. It set Jing Shao’s heart tingling, but he resisted the urge to make a move. He knew that Mu Hanzhang was genuinely tired, so he said nothing more and let the man in his arms sleep in peace for a while.

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“PRINCE CHENG CAN NO LONGER inherit the throne. Winning him over can only help your husband. Why must you make things awkward for him?”

Marquise Dingnan sighed as she looked down at Princely Consort Rui lying pale in her bed. These were the words Marquis Dingnan had asked her to convey. She was not Princely Consort Rui’s birth mother, just the stepmother who joined the clan after Lady Xiao’s mother passed away. When it came to a lot of things, it simply wasn’t her place to say them. But she was obliged to relay Marquis Dingnan’s words.

“That common son was sent to the villa, but my Xiao-Si died anyway.” Princely Consort Rui paused, tears welling up in her eyes again. “Master Mobei divined that aside from that wretched common-born, the only one whose fate could suppress his was Prince Cheng!”

As she said this, traces of hatred spilled from her eyes. She heard that Prince Cheng had held the child before he was even a month old. Prince Cheng had spent years killing on a battlefield, and he was haunted by the malicious aura of vengeful spirits. How could such a frail child tainted by it not die early?

“Aiyoh!” Marquise Dingnan gasped aloud and looked around her. She got up and shooed the handmaidens so they were standing farther away before she sat back down again. “You can’t say such things so carelessly, or Prince Rui might hear about it.”

Chapter 97:
Battle Report

"HIS HIGHNESS HASN'T set foot in this courtyard since Xiao-Si passed away!" Lady Xiao said indifferently.

Marquise Dingnan looked her over carefully, and her brows drew together despite herself. The eldest daughter of the Xiao family had always been clever, and this resentful, reckless tone of hers did not seem like her at all. Even though Marquise Dingnan did not wish to get involved, the House of Dingnan and Prince Rui were bound together. If their young mistress lost her influence over him, their family would gain no advantage even if Jing Chen did ascend the throne one day. When she thought of that, her expression turned cold.

"You brought all of this on yourself."

Lady Xiao glared coldly at her stepmother. "Mother, if there's nothing else, please leave. I'm tired."

Marquise Dingnan clutched her handkerchief in an effort to hold back her anger and keep her tone as calm as possible. "This Master Mobei you speak of has hanged herself in Jadecloud Temple."

"What?" Lady Xiao's eyes widened.

"That Mobei made a habit of freeloading off noble households, and yet still you trusted her above everyone else. She no doubt took her own life because Xiao-Si is gone, fearing that His Highness might hold her accountable," said Marquise Dingnan, taking a deep breath. "I know you won't listen to what I say, but let me give you one piece of advice. Even if you are Prince Rui's rightful consort, without His Highness's regard, you are nothing!"

After saying so, she got up and left without even registering Princely Consort Rui's response.

Marquise Dingnan was still seething on her way back. She was concubine born herself, but because the previous Marquise Dingnan, who

was her legitimate-born elder sister, passed away, she was able to marry into the House of Dingnan. She had always despised primary wives who were quick to blame concubine-born sons and daughters for any misfortune.

When the handmaiden who came as part of her dowry saw her so angry, she started to criticize Princely Consort Rui as well. “Madam, if Princely Consort Rui behaving like this causes His Highness’s affections to wane, what then?”

“If she still has a shred of sense left, she’ll hurry and bring the common-born son back from the villa and raise him properly at her side,” said Marquise Dingnan.

But once she’d vented a bit, she said no more. Inwardly, though, she sneered; any daughter brought up by her elder sister might be skilled at managing the harem, but she’d likely treat the common-born sons just the way her sister had.

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JING SHAO BROUGHT his consort back to the estate. By the time the carriage stopped, the man in his arms was in a deep sleep. As the coachman lifted the carriage curtain, sunlight streamed in and cast long shadows beneath the fringes of Mu Hanzhang’s eyelashes.

Jing Shao put a finger to his own lips to make sure everyone stayed silent before carefully carrying Mu Hanzhang out of the carriage.

It was already swelteringly hot at this time of year, so even though there were jade mats laid out in the carriage, the two of them were still sweaty from leaning against each other. Jing Shao didn’t really mind, but he worried that Mu Hanzhang might get too hot if he slept inside, so he laid him down on the daybed under the awning of the covered corridor.

As soon as he touched the bed, Mu Hanzhang stirred and slowly opened his eyes.

Jing Shao took the wet towel a handmaiden handed him and wiped his own face. When he saw the man on the daybed open his eyes, he tended

to Mu Hanzhang's face as well. "Sleep a while longer. I'll call you again when it's time for lunch."

The cool towel wiped away the stickiness on his face, and the gentle breeze under the awning was rather pleasant. Mu Hanzhang couldn't help squinting, thinking that Jing Shao was becoming more and more like a proper Marquise Wenyuan. However, he dared not say such words aloud, for his back and his buttocks were still sore.

Jing Shao saw the smile in his consort's eyes, but he had no idea what it meant. He reached out to untie his belt.

"What are you doing?" Mu Hanzhang immediately grabbed the hand approaching his waist. He thought, *I didn't say that aloud, so why is he already getting handsy?*

"Aren't you hot dressed in that thick court outfit?" Jing Shao saw the slight flush in his face, and something tugged at his heart. He slowly moved closer. "What were you thinking? Hmm?"

Mu Hanzhang stared at the handsome face at close quarters and glared. "It is quite hot. I'm going to go change." He tried to rise, but the man on top of him was pinning him down so that it was impossible for him to move.

"You're tired; let me help you change." Jing Shao grinned. He'd become quite enamored with the intricately layered court attire worn by the Marquis Wenyuan ever since he'd first gotten to take it off; he especially enjoyed the process of removing it piece by piece by piece.

"Don't—don't…" They were in the main covered corridor leading to the east wing, and a servant might walk by at any moment. Panicked, Mu Hanzhang blurted out, "Are you really having that much fun playing Marquise Wenyuan?"

Jing Shao's hand froze in midair, and a dangerous light gradually crept into his eyes. Keeping his tone even, he asked, "Junqing, what did you say?"

"Oh no—nothing." Mu Hanzhang looked taken aback, and when he realized what he'd just said, he involuntarily backed away a little. "There was something I forgot to tell you: Today the first prince…ah…"

Jing Shao quickly grabbed the hands that were trying to push him away, pressed both wrists together, and pinned them above Mu Hanzhang's head. "Apparently, we'll have to reaffirm today just which of us is the husband and which is the wife, hmm?" he said. He brought his other hand to his mouth and breathed onto it, then, grinning wickedly, he reached toward the ticklish spot of the man beneath him.

"Ah…ha ha ha…don't—mm…" Mu Hanzhang could not get away and was tragically subjected to the household rules Prince Cheng made up.

Right in front of the main house of the east wing was a small ornamental garden, planted with layer upon layer of green bamboo and short shrubs. Miaoxi had come to deliver tea, and she'd only just stepped through the moon door when she heard Princely Consort Cheng's startled gasps and stopped in her tracks.

She couldn't see much through the bamboo, but she could vaguely make out Prince Cheng holding down Princely Consort Cheng. The young girl reddened at once. *His Highness, he—he's far too hot-blooded.* She didn't even dare bring in the tea anymore and stamped her feet a few times before beating a quick retreat.

After all the fuss, the two of them were now both drenched in sweat, and Jing Shao decided to lie sprawled on top of his consort whose exquisite court attire had been pulled open, revealing a smooth chest glistening with a sheen of sweat.

Mu Hanzhang took a moment to catch his breath and pushed at the big head resting on him. That head lolled back an inch or so before instantly shifting back two inches. Mu Hanzhang couldn't help rolling his eyes, but he had to let Jing Shao know what the first prince did today at court.

"Brother brought up opening up a test port today, and the first prince surprisingly didn't object. Everything he said all seemed to suggest that he wants me to go."

That was the plan all along, and Mu Hanzhang himself wanted to head to the port to get familiar with how the business was done. He'd always wanted to be involved with the maritime trade, but since the imperial court denied its legitimacy, whether as Princely Consort Cheng or Marquis Wenyuan, he could not take part in illicit trade. It might not be as bad as smuggling salt permits, but it would still invite criticism.

Jing Shao's eyes were fixed on a pink nipple next to his face, the skin around it still reddened with bite marks he'd put there last night. The sight of it was certainly enticing. "Of course he wouldn't be so nice. I'm guessing he's trying to send you off as quickly as possible. That way I'd be trapped here in the estate and know nothing."

"I don't think it's that simple. Would they try to tamper with the operations of the port?" Mu Hanzhang's brows drew together.

Ever since the first prince returned from Yunnan-Tibet, he'd grown noticeably darker in temperament.

"Don't worry—just do whatever you want. As long as I'm around, no one can hurt you," Jing Shao said as he shimmied forward again.

Like a big dog that had spotted a piece of meat but was too lazy to get up, he tried his best to stretch his tongue to give that nipple, slightly swollen still, a little lick.

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THERE HAD BEEN no good news out of Jiangnan as yet. The fourth prince had taken control of the military as soon as he'd gotten to Jiangnan and had forbidden the regional commander of Jiangnan from going into battle. He explained that he was worried the soldiers wouldn't know whose orders to follow. Lu Zhanpeng was happy enough to do nothing and stood by with his arms folded to watch the show. Since he didn't have to go into battle, he didn't have to write battle reports to His Majesty either.

When Emperor Hongzheng read Jing Yu's battle reports, he couldn't help but frown. All it said was that King Huainan was holed up in the watchtower, not daring to come out to fight, and so there had been little progress thus far.

The truth was Jing Yu wasn't doing well at all. Sure, King Huainan was inside the watchtower, but his generals were at the foot of it! Each day he'd send out a general who, as if toying with Jing Yu, thrashed his army for a while before running off. And when he gave chase, he was greeted

with either horse-tripping ropes or caltrops, and these fights left him utterly infuriated.

***

MEANWHILE, THE BEIWEI ESTATE was hosting the one-month banquet for Marquis Beiwei's youngest son.

Jing Shao was raring to go see his little brother-in-law who'd just turned a month old, because he'd been told that the baby looked very much like Mu Hanzhang when he was little. But he'd already slipped out of the estate when Xiao-Si passed away, and the Marquis Beiwei Estate would be full of the capital's nobles. As someone under house arrest, there was no way for him to attend.

Glowing with happiness, Marquis Beiwei chattered with his guests, accepting compliments both real and insincere. Mu Hanzhang greeted his father, then went to the harem to visit his mother and younger brother, who'd just completed their month of postpartum confinement.

Lady Qiu sat on the bed in a gown made of soft fabric, playing with her youngest son in her arms. "Be a good boy, Lin-er; you'll get to see your older brother very soon."

Her slightly plump face looked radiant and rosy, and her eyes, so like Mu Hanzhang's, were full of affection. Seeing this serene and beautiful picture before him, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help smiling; he got next to the bed to see his younger brother.

Mu Longlin had already shed the redness of a newborn, and his once scrunched-up little face had smoothed out, now appearing fair and tender, a truly delightful sight. He was quiet and didn't fuss or cry; his big eyes darted around inquisitively. When he saw Mu Hanzhang, he stared at him with intense curiosity, unable to look away.

"Lin-er, this is your brother. Come on, say *brother*." Lady Qiu smiled as she held the child out toward Mu Hanzhang.

Amused by his mother’s actions, Mu Hanzhang said, “Mother, he’s only a month old. How could he possibly say anything?”

“The earlier you teach him to, the earlier he’ll start to speak. You were speaking by seven months,” said Lady Qiu, the smile gradually fading from her face.

She hadn’t been able to keep Hanzhang by her side when he was little and could only check on him every few days, unlike Lin-er whom she could hold in her arms every single day. She couldn’t help sighing.

Changing the subject, she said, “I heard Princely Consort Rui brought the common-born son and the princely concubine, who had been staying at the villa, back to the estate.”

Mu Hanzhang found this amusing. “Mother, why are you always worrying about what’s going on at the Prince Rui Estate?” The Beiwei Estate had enough on its plate, yet his mother was always concerned about another family. It’d been a long time since he’d paid any attention to these affairs of the harem.

“It’s a good thing if she can let it go,” said Lady Qiu with a sigh. “No matter how well His Highness and Prince Rui get along, small missteps and grievances can still pile up. You should advise His Highness to always speak openly with his elder brother and not let any misunderstandings arise.”

Mu Hanzhang was surprised that she was able to deduce everything so accurately based on the embellished rumors circulating among women. It sounded as though what he’d done was correct, then. He hadn’t wanted Jing Shao to keep investigating the Jadecloud Nunnery because he was worried there might be some conspiracy afoot, and getting mixed up in it would be no different from falling into a pit of filth. Jing Chen was much more calculating than Jing Shao, and such people tended to overthink. The best way to deal with him was to be candid and avoid hiding anything at all, so that conflict between the two brothers could be kept to a minimum.

After dealing with his relatives for a full day, Mu Hanzhang came out of the estate feeling truly exhausted. He’d been away from all the drama of the harem, and hearing about it again really was rather annoying. By contrast, the simple and tranquil Prince Cheng Estate was the real home that put his mind at ease. With that thought in mind, he climbed into the

carriage, only to find his prince had once again come in secret to pick him up, and he couldn’t help rewarding him with a gentle kiss.

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THE TRADE PORT WAS finally decided upon, and each department had drafted their regulations. The court officials also had no objections to temporarily opening a port.

After morning court, Emperor Hongzheng summoned Mu Hanzhang to the imperial study.

“This one would like to go,” Mu Hanzhang said firmly.

“Then where do you think the best place to open this port is?” Emperor Hongzheng asked while looking at the painted map on his wall.

“This one believes that the best place for a port is Jiangnan.” Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes, and without waiting for Emperor Hongzheng to ask for elaboration, he stated, “Firstly, the Dongnan region has only just had its feudatory abolished and is not yet stable. Secondly, Jiangnan is rich in resources, so foreigners can conduct trade locally, thus keeping them from lingering in the Chen Empire for too long and potentially causing trouble.”

Emperor Hongzheng turned around and gazed quietly at him for a long while. He produced an imperial edict from his sleeve and handed it to Mu Hanzhang.

“I have already ordered someone to make the arrangements. In a few days, you’ll set out for Luzhou.”

Mu Hanzhang knelt to accept the imperial edict with its bright yellow cover.

***

JING SHAO SCANNED his father's written edict. "Luzhou?"

While it sounded like a province, Luzhou wasn't one but a district not far from Pingjiang. Because it was at the mouth of a large river, where there was a sandy islet often visited by little egrets, it was called "lu" for little egret, and "zhou" meaning islet.

Mu Hanzhang stared at Jing Shao. "Father wants me to leave in the next few days. What should I do?"

He'd assumed this would take a few more days to finalize, but it seemed Emperor Hongzheng was in even more of a rush than he was. With Jing Shao still under house arrest, wouldn't this result in their separation?

Jing Shao had clearly come to the same conclusion. His brows gradually furrowed as he wondered to himself, *What do we feed you for, Gu Huaiqing? Why haven't you already beaten Jing Yu badly enough to make him run back here in tears?*

***

AT MORNING COURT the next day, Emperor Hongzheng announced the appointment of Marquis Wenyuan as his imperial envoy to Luzhou to make arrangements for maritime trade. Marquis Wenyuan was already responsible for all the minutiae of foreign tribute, and maritime trade was his proposal, so for him to be sent there was perfectly understandable.

While Mu Hanzhang silently fretted, an ominous feeling arose inside him after he saw a glint flashing in the first prince's eyes.

Jing Chen frowned inwardly as well. If the first prince and his allies were not intervening to stop Mu Hanzhang's appointment, something might happen to his brother-in-law if he let him travel there on his own.

"Report—"

Just then, a loud and clear announcement came from outside the hall. "Urgent military dispatch!"

Emperor Hongzheng had them bring it to him right away. It was an urgent message from the regional commander of Jiangnan, marked for express delivery, with a simple message: *King Huainan has launched an attack on the fourth prince and dealt him a crushing defeat.* Now they had taken two cities in succession and were on the verge of attacking Pingjiang!

Emperor Hongzheng was so furious that his hands were shaking. “Disgraceful fool!”

The court officials looked at each other in dismay. For more than a month, the fourth prince had pressed the assault on Huainan. Failing to capture even a single city was bad enough, but to lose two instead was simply…

“Your Majesty, Jiangnan is less than three hundred miles from the capital. If Pingjiang falls, the capital will not stand!” the minister of war said loudly, his voice far more sonorous than usual.

Once past Pingjiang, King Huainan could follow the canal upstream through a flat plain leading straight to the heartland of the capital; this was also why generations of Chen emperors regarded each King Huainan with suspicion and fear. It was like sleeping with a knife hanging constantly over their throats—not a moment could go by without them wishing to remove it.

Duke Mao suppressed his shock and tried to speak as calmly as possible. “The fourth prince’s battle reports never mentioned any of that. Could it be that the regional commander of Jiangnan is exaggerating?”

“But Your Majesty, we must stop King Huainan from breaching Pingjiang at any cost!” Marquis Dingnan said earnestly. Having defended Pingjiang in his youth, he naturally understood the stakes involved.

Jing Chen stepped forward and said solemnly: “Father, your son believes that we can no longer afford to worry about these other things. Prince Cheng must be swiftly dispatched to the field!”

A moment of silence fell over the Grand Hall. Everyone knew perfectly well what he was referring to: There was no time to worry about training young princes or a confinement order anymore.

“This one also believes that Prince Cheng should be dispatched!” the minister of war said loudly.

“This one seconds the motion!”

“This one seconds the motion!”

Chapter 98:
The District Magistrate

NO MATTER HOW ARROGANT and full of himself the fourth prince might have been, he had never neglected his study of strategy tomes ever since childhood; that he'd essentially been held down by King Huainan and had gotten a beating, with no chance to fight back at all, demonstrated just how cunning King Huainan was. With an imminent crisis looming over them, everyone understood that only Prince Cheng could contend with him, so the entire court echoed the call for Prince Cheng to lead the expedition.

"Convey our decree: Fourth Prince Jing Yu shall immediately transfer his military command to the Jiangnan regional commander, Lu Zhanpeng. Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, is to march with his vanguard battalion and set forth against Huainan!"

Emperor Hongzheng took a deep breath and kept his anger in check before issuing a series of imperial decrees, requesting that Lu Zhanpeng hold Pingjiang City at all costs before Jing Shao's arrival. At the same time, he summoned the fourth prince back to the capital immediately, so that he would not disgrace himself in front of King Huainan any longer.

When Jing Shao received the imperial decree, he simply smiled. He asked Duofu to prepare Mu Hanzhang's carriage at once and pack their luggage, then asked Hao Dadao to leave for Qi County to bring his vanguard battalion to the southern outskirts of the capital to await his orders.

By the time Mu Hanzhang returned, Jing Shao was already fully ready to leave, and the carriage was neatly packed.

"Raahr!" Of course, inside the carriage was Li'l Sunbeam, who had decided that he must also come along.

Mu Hanzhang looked at the tiger who was pretending to be a rug on a jade-bead mat and felt the corner of his mouth twitch. "What are you bringing the tiger for?"

Although Jing Shao and Gu Huaiqing had already made arrangements and this war was just for show, taking Mu Hanzhang to Jiangnan could be justified since he was on the way. But how was he supposed to explain bringing the tiger along?

“Word has it that King Huainan keeps a lion of unmatched ferocity. This Prince fears he may not be able to restrain it, so this savage tiger is coming along to hold the line,” said Jing Shao, with a perfectly straight face.

A savage tiger? Mu Hanzhang reached out and poked at Li’l Sunbeam’s furry head.

That savage tiger immediately turned over to expose his fluffy white belly and looked up at him. If he was counting on this guy to hold the line, their army would likely be totally annihilated…

Mu Hanzhang could only head back to the palace to explain that Jing Shao would be taking him to Jiangnan, as it would be on his way. Since the intention of his whole venture was just a trial, few officials were needed, and they’d already all gone ahead to Jiangnan, Mu Hanzhang was going to head there on his own. Emperor Hongzheng did not object; having this frail and gentle son-in-law of his travel with Jing Shao would eliminate the need to assign additional bodyguards to protect Mu Hanzhang, which would save the emperor a lot of hassle.

Because the situation at the front line was so critical, they didn’t even get an imperial send-off. Jing Shao went straight to the army camp south of the city and set off with his troops immediately.

The imperial edict was sent to Jiangnan as an urgent dispatch and took less than three days to arrive in Jing Yu’s hands. By the time Jing Shao made it to Jiangnan, Jing Yu had already left with his tail between his legs, and Lu Zhanpeng was personally leading his troops against the invading Huainan forces on the front lines.

“You finally made it.” Lu Zhanpeng took a big gulp of tea, at last getting a chance to catch his breath.

Seeing Brined Bird looking all scruffy, Jing Shao couldn’t help mocking him. “How are you just like Jing Yu? A single King Huainan has got you beaten so badly you’re pissin’ yourself?”

“As if!” Lu Zhanpeng shot him a glare. “You have no idea how incompetent that brat is or how many troops he’s lost! By the time I took over this mess, King Huainan’s battering rams were already at the city gates!” Recalling the image of that moment still made him shudder.

Mu Hanzhang took Li’l Sunbeam for a walk around their new residence. This courtyard house was the home Jing Shao asked Lu Zhanpeng to help him acquire, and it was designed in the style of a typical Jiangnan estate—with a picturesque view every five steps and a place to rest every ten. It had small bridges over flowing water, platforms and water pavilions, bamboo groves and clusters of flowers, and so many things to look at that it was dazzling to behold.

Li’l Sunbeam set his sights on the large ornamental gardens with their bamboo grove and leaped over to claim it as his own, startling the servants in the gardens who let out a chorus of cries.

After shooing away the chatterbox Lu Zhanpeng, Jing Shao wandered into the gardens in search of his consort. There he saw a gentle stream winding around a wooden waterside pavilion, where a beauty clad in blue robes leaned against a railing, quietly reading a book. A tiger, striped in yellow and black, lay at his feet, hugging his calf, sleeping soundly. Twilight cast its glow on that handsome profile, a sweet serenity pervading the scene.

Jing Shao sauntered over. The wooden waterside pavilion had been polished until everything was smooth and even. It had no seats, but a few cushions and a low table were scattered messily across the floor. Only once Jing Shao got closer did he realize that his consort was actually sitting barefoot on the floor, one fair foot resting on Li’l Sunbeam’s belly. His soft white fur hid the top of Mu Hanzhang’s foot, making those round toes in contrast look delicately pink.

Mu Hanzhang saw him coming over and put down the book in his hand. “What’s the situation?”

“It’s getting late. The Huainan army has gone back to camp for dinner,” Jing Shao said, unconcerned.

“Luzhou is only ten miles from Pingjiang. I’ll leave for work early tomorrow morning, and I could be back by the evening if I hurry.” His calf had grown too warm and was starting to sweat from having a tiger use it as

a hugging pillow, so Mu Hanzhang moved his leg away, only to have it immediately captured by Jing Shao, setting it down to rest at his side.

"No way. Wait two more days, and once I push Gu Huaiqing back another three miles or so I can go with you." So saying, Jing Shao looked down at the foot in his hand with great interest. He grabbed a soft furry paw, its owner still asleep, and gently tickled Mu Hanzhang's tender sole.

Mu Hanzhang shrank back, ticklish. "Officials dispatched to Luzhou by Father are already there. If you come along, won't they recognize you?"

Jing Shao already had a plan for everything. "I'll disguise myself as a pageboy and go with you for a day. After that, I'll make them move the office to Pingjiang. The front court of this residence is still vacant, so it would serve perfectly well as an office."

"But…ah—" As Mu Hanzhang tried to argue, he was hoisted onto Jing Shao's shoulder.

Jing Shao held down the man squirming to get loose and smacked him on the bottom. "It's getting pretty late now, so isn't it time for Marquis Wenyuan to fulfill his duty as Princely Consort Cheng?"

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THE NEXT DAY, after repeatedly emphasizing to Mu Hanzhang that he wasn't allowed to go to Luzhou, Jing Shao rode Shadow off to the front line.

Since there was nothing else to do, Mu Hanzhang took out a small notebook and started to read. He'd asked Ge Ruoyi to write this while he drafted the maritime trade regulations. The Ge family had been in the maritime industry for generations, so she would be quite familiar with the tricks of the trade. He had originally planned on bringing Ge Ruoyi along, but since Lin-er was still young and the Beiwei Estate was in such discord, he felt he could only leave her there for the time being.

Not long after, a servant came to announce that someone was at the gates, requesting an audience with Marquis Wenyuan.

Mu Hanzhang frowned. He didn’t really know that many people in Jiangnan. “Do you know who the visitor is?”

“That man claims to be the district magistrate of Luzhou,” the servant answered.

The Luzhou district magistrate? Why would a minor magistrate know he was here? Mu Hanzhang rose. “Tell him to wait in the main hall for a little while.”

Once Mu Hanzhang changed his outfit, went to the main hall, and got to see this so-called Luzhou magistrate, he found himself standing there momentarily stunned. “Zhaoran, my friend!”

The visitor was none other than the year’s Primus Scholar, Qin Zhaoran. Mu Hanzhang hadn’t seen him since the Banquet of the Laureates. He’d heard that Qin Zhaoran had volunteered to become a local official, but he hadn’t expected he’d be the district magistrate of Luzhou.

Qin Zhaoran gazed at him steadily for a moment before he returned to himself. Hiding away the bitterness in his eyes, he bowed. “Greetings, Marquis Wenyuan.”

Chapter 99:
Jealousy

"ZHAORAN, THERE'S NO NEED for such formality." Mu Hanzhang stepped forward to gently stop him from bowing and invited him to sit wherever he liked. "I haven't seen you since the laureates' banquet. I never expected for you to end up as the magistrate of Luzhou."

Qin Zhaoran cast down his eyes. "The political ties in the capital are too tangled. I didn't want to get involved."

"Isn't that the truth." Mu Hanzhang smiled. "His Highness thought the same for you, so he didn't insist on the visit."

When Jing Shao had heard that they were classmates and invited the Primus Scholar to the estate for a banquet, he had made his invitation purely out of respect for his consort, so he didn't really mind when Qin Zhaoran didn't show up. Mu Hanzhang was only putting things this way because he always attributed all good things to Jing Shao.

When he heard that, Qin Zhaoran let out a sigh. "I have acted disgracefully and failed to repay His Highness's goodwill." He had only been able to come to a prosperous place like Luzhou because Jing Shao had made sure of it. Well aware of that fact, he had no grounds to say anything more.

Mu Hanzhang smiled. The two of them had gone to school together as children; even though many years had passed since they'd seen one another, that sense of closeness remained. He asked how things had been for him since he left the Mu clan school.

As Qin Zhaoran lowered his gaze, he hid the poignant longing in his eyes. "We promised to study for three more years before taking the Civil Service Examination together. Little did I know that you'd be married off by then."

Mu Hanzhang smiled but did not respond to his statement; he picked up his teacup and took a sip. Spring water was being diverted into his new courtyard home, giving the tea brewed here a particularly refreshing aroma.

“How did you know I was in Pingjiang?”

At this, Qin Zhaoran glanced left and right, and a serious expression spread across his face.

Realizing Qin Zhaoran had something to say, Mu Hanzhang waved to dismiss the servants. One bodyguard, assigned by Jing Shao to protect him, didn’t want to go. He only reluctantly went to stand outside the door after Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare.

Qin Zhaoran’s brow was deeply furrowed, and his expression was etched with panic. “Don’t go to Luzhou for now.”

“Why is that?” Mu Hanzhang put down his teacup, the look on his face also growing solemn.

“Someone is using my career prospects as leverage and coercing me into capturing you,” said Qin Zhaoran slowly.

Mu Hanzhang immediately tensed, his right hand involuntarily landing on the hilt of the Latent Radiance strapped to his waist.

Qin Zhaoran noticed Mu Hanzhang’s defensive reaction, and a bitter smile curved the corners of his lips. “Don’t be afraid. I’m but a mere scholar. And besides, this place is heavily guarded by Prince Cheng’s army. If I wanted to harm you, why would I come in person…?”

Near the end of his speech, his voice grew quieter in spite of himself. Only then did Mu Hanzhang notice what he’d subconsciously done, and he turned to Qin Zhaoran with apology in his eyes.

“After spending so much time with His Highness on the battlefield, I’ve picked up some habits that are hard to shake. Please don’t take it personally.”

Jing Shao returned to the sight of the guard standing pitifully outside the door all on his own. The Right Guardian behind Jing Shao darted over with a grin and asked, “Hey, why are you standing here all by yourself?”

“His Lordship and the Luzhou magistrate are having a private conversation. Subordinates are not allowed to remain in the room,” said the guard, looking rather wronged.

“Worthless!” Jing Shao kicked the guard.

He’d repeatedly left orders to make sure to keep the princely consort safe, but now they’d left him alone in a room with another man. When he thought of that, the thrill of fighting on the battlefield earlier instantly vanished, replaced by a blazing fury. He pushed open the doors to the main hall to find Mu Hanzhang sitting close to a well-dressed young man, looking as though they were chatting up a storm!

When Mu Hanzhang turned and found Jing Shao standing there seething with anger, he looked taken aback. It was barely even High Noon. How had Jing Shao managed to finish battle so soon?

To Jing Shao, that expression read as a clear sign of guilt. He grabbed Mu Hanzhang’s wrist and asked, “Who is this man?”

Noticing that Jing Shao was gripping Mu Hanzhang’s wrist so tightly that the skin grew pale, Qin Zhaoran involuntarily frowned. “Greetings, Your Highness. My name is Qin Zhaoran, a lowly official.”

Jing Shao frowned and sized him up for a moment before he recalled this year’s new Primus Scholar.

His wrist clutched tight enough for it to hurt, Mu Hanzhang twisted it to pull it out from Jing Shao’s hand. “Why are you back at this hour?”

“I came home for lunch,” said Jing Shao matter-of-factly.

Mu Hanzhang stood up and instructed the servants to get a few extra dishes ready. “Zhaoran, stay and eat with us.”

He’d thought he would be eating on his own, but now that Jing Shao had returned and the left and right guardians had also clearly come to get something to eat, there surely wouldn’t be enough food.

Qin Zhaoran declined to stay for lunch, because he’d sneaked out of his office and had to hurry back. Mu Hanzhang did not insist on keeping him.

While lunch was served, Jing Shao’s expression remained troubled; he knew that Qin Zhaoran and his consort had been classmates as children, and when he noticed that his consort showed little interest in him after he became the Primus Scholar, he’d assumed they weren’t very close and did not pay him any mind. But now, something simply felt off no matter how he looked at it.

The Right Guardian poked the Left Guardian's ticklish spot and whispered, "Is His Highness jealous?"

The Left Guardian glanced at him and stuffed the Right Guardian's mouth with the chicken leg he'd just picked up using his chopsticks. "Eat your food."

"Mm…" His mouth now stoppered, the Right Guardian could only keep quiet and start chewing.

Taking Jing Shao's unhappiness as an indication of how poorly the battle had gone today, Mu Hanzhang picked up some of Jing Shao's favorite foods with his chopsticks and placed them in his bowl. And as he did, he told Jing Shao what Qin Zhaoran had said.

Jing Shao's expression warmed after he ate the food his consort placed in his bowl, and once he heard Mu Hanzhang's update, a cold sweat broke out over his body. Good thing he hadn't let Junqing go by himself.

"I'll have Lu Zhanpeng look into this. Don't go out for the time being."

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OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Jing Shao went out to meet Gu Huaiqing on the battlefield every day, while Mu Hanzhang summoned the officials whom Emperor Hongzheng had previously dispatched to Luzhou so they could work in their estate. Most of the preliminary work involved revising the regulations based on local conditions, as well as repairing the docks. Jing Shao gave him the left and right guardians to use as he wished, so he entrusted the work of repairing the docks to the two of them.

Mu Hanzhang frowned as he stared down at the few sheets of paper Lu Zhanpeng handed to him. "The prefect of Jiangzhou?" This was something Lu Zhanpeng had discovered based on the clues Qin Zhaoran mentioned.

Pingjiang and Luzhou were both a part of Jiangzhou, so the prefect of Jiangzhou was Qin Zhaoran's direct superior, and this was the very same

person who wanted to kidnap Mu Hanzhang.

“Luzhou is a seaport, and foreign ships have always docked there. Whenever foreigners sold their goods, these officials would take a cut of the profits.” Lu Zhanpeng chuckled disdainfully. “No doubt this prefect of Jiangzhou has accumulated quite a fortune.”

Mu Hanzhang furrowed his brow. He hadn’t thought about how this project might encroach upon the vested interest of local officials; for him to establish an official maritime trading port in Luzhou was no different from taking food out of these people’s mouths. It was no wonder they’d become desperate enough to resort to such despicable measures. But since that man knew full well who he was yet still dared to so blatantly threaten Qin Zhaoran into acting on his behalf, someone much higher up must have been backing him. Also, if Qin Zhaoran could be threatened by him, did that mean he was also involved in taking a cut of illicit trade?

Outside the city of Jiangzhou, the situation on the battlefield remained tense, but after hearing that Prince Cheng was coming, the people of Jiangnan felt far better about their prospects. The morale of the Jiangnan army also improved greatly.

Jing Shao told the soldiers to stay calm, then charged to the front of the formation with his spear.

The Huainan army slowly parted to make way, and Gu Huaiqing trotted out to meet him on horseback. “Prince Cheng. To see Your Highness coming to fight on the front line… Why, I’m so flattered.”

“This Prince has no patience to mince words with you today.” Jing Shao casually rested the spear on his shoulder and said, “Why don’t we make a bet?”

With a smile, Gu Huaiqing twirled the long-handled saber in his hand. “What sort of bet?”

Jing Shao slid the spear off his shoulder and slowly swung it around so its tip pointed at Gu Huaiqing. “We’ll have a match, just you and me. If I win, you move your troops back three miles and we’ll fight again tomorrow.”

Gu Huaiqing raised an eyebrow. “If Your Highness is willing to grant me the honor of a duel, of course I couldn’t ask for more.” By the time he

got to the latter half of his sentence, the long-handled saber he held was already swinging, the sharp edge slashing toward Jing Shao at a tricky angle.

Jing Shao turned away as he thrust his spear, flicking aside the blade that had made it all the way to his chest. As he pivoted the force of his blow just so, he pushed the saber aside and went straight for Gu Huaiqing's eyes.

For a moment, the flash of blades dazzled the eye as the two marshals on the battlefield fought to a standstill; several generals looked at each other in confusion, not quite comprehending how a war ever got to this point. One side was laying siege to a city while the other was trying to defend it, so how did it turn into a martial arts sparring session between their two marshals?

Gu Huaiqing stopped Jing Shao's silver spear and whispered, "Why are you in such a rush today?"

"I'm in a rush to get home for dinner," said Jing Shao, shooting him a look before jabbing his spear over with a backhand.

Gu Huaiqing grunted as he was struck in the ribs by the spear shaft, but he just held it fast by clamping down on it with his arm. "I'll come too."

"None for you!" Jing Shao didn't seem to be in a good mood, and his moves were getting increasingly ruthless.

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MU HANZHANG HAD NAMED their new residence in Pingjiang the Amorphous Gardens, after the saying: "Being amorphous like water embodies the highest virtue, for it yields to all forms, both square and round."[2] But Jing Shao firmly believed that his consort was praising his deep love for Mu Hanzhang, because of the saying about a devoted man: "Faced with three thousand amorphous rivers, I draw only one ladle to drink."

Each day Jing Shao would come back in time for dinner, but aside from the first day, he never came home for lunch again. Perhaps he felt it

unreasonable to come home for every meal.

This day Qin Zhaoran had come to deliver Luzhou's ledgers and case files, and as Mu Hanzhang had been meaning to ask him about officials taking a cut in the illicit maritime trade, he kept Qin Zhaoran at the Amorphous Gardens for lunch. With their interests in common, conversation simply flowed once they started talking.

"The inkstone you previously gave me has proven quite useful," said Mu Hanzhang to Qin Zhaoran with a gentle smile.

At the mention of the inkstone, Qin Zhaoran thought of their days studying together as children, and a smile developed on his face. "It's a promise I made you a long time ago, and I've never forgotten."

Mu Hanzhang smiled without responding and instead poured him a cup of wine. From what he recalled, Qin Zhaoran didn't have much of an alcohol tolerance, and according to Jing Shao, getting people drunk was a good way to get information out of them.

After staring at the hand on the wine jug, smooth as polished jade, Qin Zhaoran couldn't help asking: "How has… How has life treated you all these years?"

"I believe you've seen how life has treated me, Zhaoran," said Mu Hanzhang, pouring himself a cup as well. He held it between his fingers and gave it a swirl, but he did not drink it.

"I never thought that principal mother of yours would be so cruel." Qin Zhaoran knocked back his wine, then he refilled his own cup and did not stop drinking until he'd forced down several. He stared at Mu Hanzhang's handsome face, so near at hand, and sighed heavily. "The whole time I'd been waiting for the news that you'd become the new Primus Scholar, but what I heard instead was the tragic report of your marriage…" As he said this, Qin Zhaoran slumped over the table and let out a few grunts that sounded like something between a laugh and a sob.

Mu Hanzhang paused in surprise and looked down at the cup in his hand. "I thought you would be taking the exam before me."

Qin Zhaoran laughed aloud, seemingly a little intoxicated. "I knew that principal mother of yours wouldn't let you marry a woman, so I'd indulged in delusions all this time…"

Mu Hanzhang abruptly stood up. “Qin, my friend, you’re drunk.”

“Hanzhang…” Qin Zhaoran murmured softly, then fell asleep slumped over the table.

Outside the window, Jing Shao’s hands slowly clenched into fists. There was no way to tell how long he’d been standing there.

No wonder Mu Hanzhang had never taken part in the spring imperial exam at eighteen, even though his talent allowed him to become a provincial graduate at seventeen. It seemed they were waiting for each other to become the Primus Scholar—to better marry the other? This was such a tragic tale of a gifted scholar studying for ten years only for his beloved to marry someone else! What did that make him, then? An evil tyrant who broke up a pair of lovers?

Chapter 100:
Laying Claim

WHEN HE HEARD Mu Hanzhang call for a servant to bring Qin Zhaoran to a guest room, Jing Shao turned and left. Even though he was so angry he felt he might explode, he forced himself to calm down; if he went inside like this now, he might end up doing something irreparable.

The sun was setting. Mu Hanzhang glanced at the sumptuous spread before him and couldn't help but frown.

"Is His Highness not back yet?"

The servants looked at each other. Of course they had no idea where His Highness had gone.

Mu Hanzhang let out a sigh and told the servants to clear the cold food. He'd only just gotten to his feet when familiar footsteps sounded outside the door. Before he could even look up, he was pulled into a tight embrace by the man who'd come right at him.

"Where have you been—" Mu Hanzhang grunted as Jing Shao suddenly picked him up.

Mu Hanzhang pushed at him a couple of times, trying to get free, but in no time at all he'd been carried into the inner chamber. Jing Shao tossed the man in his arms onto the bed, stripped off his own clothes, and pounced on top of him.

"You're injured?" Mu Hanzhang saw the purpling bruises on Jing Shao's shoulder and tried to get up to get a better look, only to be pinned down again.

Jing Shao held down the man squirming beneath him and yanked his robes open in one swift motion, then he bent down to press his mouth to him, eager to confirm that this man belonged to him—that no one could take him away.

At first, Mu Hanzhang had wanted to talk him into eating dinner before anything else, but Jing Shao's skillful hands and lips gradually

piqued his interest; the hand he had pressed against Jing Shao's chest in an attempt to push him away had subconsciously slipped down to clutch at the bedsheets beneath him.

Jing Shao quickly moved over Mu Hanzhang's body, and as he watched his eyes grow glazed and unfocused, hearing his soft moans as he shifted in the bed, he nevertheless felt a sense of emptiness within him. Everything had gone far too smoothly since his rebirth. He'd always assumed that Junqing used to like women, or rather, that the studious Junqing with eyes for nothing beyond books had never liked anyone at all. But then this Qin Zhaoran had suddenly shown up out of nowhere. They were childhood sweethearts with shared interests and aspirations; they could discuss poetry, prose, and current affairs. Meanwhile, Jing Shao was merely the prince whom Marquis Beiwei had forced Junqing to marry, and Junqing simply had no choice but to accept…

Jing Shao knew that he was perhaps overthinking it, so that afternoon he'd gone and picked a fight with Gu Huaiqing again, trying to forget all about it. But the more he deliberately tried to put it out of his mind, the more the idea haunted him.

Perhaps Junqing had long held feelings for a certain someone. All the grievances Junqing had held against him in his previous life, his initial resistance in this life: All this flashed before his eyes, one scene after another, all of it mocking him, telling him that what they had was nothing but his own wishful thinking. If Junqing were given the chance to choose, he might not even spare him a single glance…

As he thought this, Jing Shao's movements grew increasingly aggressive.

Mu Hanzhang soon started to feel pain, and he couldn't help furrowing his brow. "Not… Not so hard… Ah…"

But Jing Shao paid him no heed, charging ahead even more rashly as though in a frenzy.

Mu Hanzhang grunted and reached out to push him away, but he simply didn't have the strength. The way the man moved above him grew more boorish by the moment, and as the iron-hard, massive thing pummeled him inside, his pleasure ebbed away like the tide and was replaced by pain that grew more intense by the moment.

“Ah…it hurts…”

Mu Hanzhang raised his head, his fair neck forming a graceful arch that Jing Shao captured with his teeth. Mu Hanzhang felt as if a wild beast was mauling him, and fear and pain swept through his whole body.

“Stop…stop…ah…”

The man beneath him grew taut, and it wasn’t long before Jing Shao came. He panted heavily for a moment before he slowly withdrew. Only when he saw the way the man beneath him trembled and curled up into himself did he finally realize that he’d gone too far.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao reached out hesitatingly, but when he touched Mu Hanzhang’s arm, his hand was immediately flung away.

Seeing Mu Hanzhang in so much pain that he’d doubled up, Jing Shao was instantly flooded with regret. His hands slowly clenched into fists. This man was the cleanest, warmest entity in the world; if he were to lose him, there would be no point in being reborn to live another life.

Jing Shao took a deep breath and said, without much conviction behind his words, “I-I’m telling you, no matter who you might have feelings for, you will only ever be my princely consort. I’m never going to let you go.”

Mu Hanzhang slowly turned back to him and gave him a strange look. “What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s going on between you and Qin Zhaoran?” As a husband who’d caught his wife having an affair, Jing Shao felt that he was the one who had been wronged, and the more he spoke the more justified he felt. “Why didn’t you take the civil exams when you were eighteen?”

Mu Hanzhang stared at him blankly for a while and, without thinking, responded quietly to the question. “The headmaster said my studies were too broad, unlike Qin Zhaoran, who only ever read the classics, so I should study for three more years…”

“Then why did Qin Zhaoran say he was waiting for you to become the Primus Scholar?” Jing Shao was going all in, spilling everything on his mind. “Before you married me, did you have some sort of agreement with

him that whichever one of you became the Primus Scholar first would marry the other?”

Mu Hanzhang stared at him with wide eyes for a long while before he finally understood what was happening—apparently, this guy was just jealous!

He ignored the pain he felt and slowly sat up, letting out a light sigh. “Is there something that I’ve never told you?”

As soon as Jing Shao heard that, every hair on his body stood on end. Was Junqing about to confess that Qin Zhaoran and he once pledged lifelong devotion to one another? His heart seethed with bitterness—even if these two were still in love with each other, he would not hesitate to play the villain, break up the lovers, and chain Junqing firmly to his side. He’d lived two lifetimes, and only one person had ever truly been his. He would never give him up to anyone!

Mu Hanzhang slowly reached out a hand and caressed Jing Shao’s handsome profile. “I love you.”

“Hmph, I’m telling you, even if you did meet him before me, I’m still going to—” Jing Shao suddenly stopped mid-sentence. “Junqing, what did you say?”

Mu Hanzhang rolled his eyes and turned to lie back down, but he was pulled bodily into Jing Shao’s arms.

“Say it again!” Jing Shao fervently hugged him tight. Without waiting for his answer, he continued, “I just knew it. How could you possibly like anyone else when This Prince is so wise and valiant?! I love you too, Junqing. Over two lifetimes, I have only ever loved you.”

The arms that held him so tightly were trembling ever so slightly, and in the end, Mu Hanzhang could only sigh. He had initially thought Jing Shao was just like a child when it came to love, and apparently that still held true. But his love was so simple that it would not tolerate even a trace of falsehood; like a little animal marking its territory, he would not let anyone lay a finger on what was his.

“Qin Zhaoran and I are merely old schoolmates. If he hadn’t become the Primus Scholar, I would have forgotten all about him.”

Hearing that made Jing Shao even happier. Suddenly, something occurred to him, and he immediately set the man in his arms back onto the bed. “Let me have a look. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not…” Mu Hanzhang’s face flushed at once, but there was no arguing with him. Jing Shao proceeded to hold him down and got a good look at every last inch of him.

Jing Shao examined him carefully and slowly probed inside him with a single finger. He was relieved to find that there was no bleeding, but there was some slight redness and swelling.

Mu Hanzhang grunted softly and shoved him a little.

Jing Shao moved his finger, still buried inside of Mu Hanzhang. The environment was soft, moist, and slippery, enticing him to push deeper within. This man was his, completely, inside and out; just thinking about it made his heart swell until it was brimming over. He leaned in close and kissed those soft lips patterned with bite marks. Aided by the residual fluid from earlier, he found no resistance as he once again slid his cock into that wonderful body.

As the moon hung high in the sky, all was quiet in the Amorphous Gardens, but the nodding birds atop the eaves were startled into flight by the occasional moan that escaped the room below.

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B*ANG!*

Jing Shao hugged his pillow as he stared blankly at the tightly closed door in front of him. He. Was. Actually. Thrown out. Of their bedroom. By his very own consort!

“Rawr-ah!” Li’l Sunbeam was playing out in the yard, but when he heard the noise, he dropped the branch in his mouth and bolted into the covered corridor.

“What do you think you’re looking at, you stupid tiger?!” Jing Shao glared at Li’l Sunbeam, who’d come to gawk. “This Prince must reassert

patriarchal authority and make sure the other understands that driving his husband out of the bedroom constitutes a violation of the seven misconducts, which is grounds for divorce!”

The furry tiger gave him a look of contempt.

Jing Shao let out a cold snort, then stepped forward and knocked on the door. “Junqing, I know I was wrong. Let me in!”

The guards outside the courtyard had all been transferred here from his vanguard battalion, and when they heard His Highness shouting at the top of his lungs, they synchronously lurched and tripped over themselves. The leader gave the rest of them a word of reprimand, then quickly led the detachment away from the gate of the main house.

The door creaked open halfway, and within its frame stood Mu Hanzhang, glaring at him. “Are you not embarrassed, howling like that in the middle of the night?”

Jing Shao immediately wedged his hand into the open door and smiled apologetically. “Junqing, I messed up, but please don’t kick me out. I don’t have my own bedroom here in the Amorphous Gardens. Are you asking me to sleep out in the courtyard?”

While the two of them were talking, Li’l Sunbeam had squeezed inside with Mu Hanzhang. Mu Hanzhang rubbed his temples and turned back within. Jing Shao gleefully followed him and closed the door behind them.

The big tiger had already leaped onto the bed entirely uninvited, rolling around on the soft quilt. After clambering to the inner side of the bed, Mu Hanzhang pushed the tiger into the middle, forming a hard boundary.

Jing Shao pulled a long face. “Junqing…”

That person ignored him and went to sleep facing away from him, leaving him nothing but the view of a beautiful back. His soft summer underrobe clung to his skin, and through a thin layer of silk one could vaguely make out butterfly-shaped shoulder blades strewn with red marks. Just seeing them was enough to make his heart tingle with longing; he wanted to pull that warm body suffused in that familiar refreshing scent into

his arms. But when he reached out, all he managed to grab was a handful of furry tiger.

Li’l Sunbeam had gotten much bigger; he was as long as person was tall when lying down. He slept all sprawled out on the bed, his wide body blocking each of Jing Shao’s avenues of approach.

Jing Shao furiously grabbed a furry ear and further squeezed onto the bed. Sleep!

After a long while—just as Jing Shao was about to fall asleep—he suddenly heard Mu Hanzhang ask, “What did you mean when you said that you have loved only me over two lifetimes?”

Jing Shao shivered awake and opened his eyes. He was met with a pair of piercing tiger eyes shining in the darkness. He reached out and flicked the tiger’s head. “As I do in this life, so will I in the next.”

Mu Hanzhang turned over and stared at him intently. “Then what about those concubines you had before we got married?”

Jing Shao coughed, almost choking on his own saliva, then said with a perfectly straight face: “Never touched them.”

“What about Song Lingxin?”

“I never touched her either!”

Mu Hanzhang arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really!” Jing Shao firmly declared. “If you don’t believe me, I’ll show you my virginity mark!”[3] As he spoke, he rolled up his sleeve as if to show him, looking every bit the image of a virtuous and chaste woman.

“There you go with your nonsense again!” Mu Hanzhang found himself smiling finally, his lips pursed. Then he slowly leaned in and gave him a light kiss.

Jing Shao’s eyes widened, and he pursued him, trying to get another, but only wound up with a mouthful of fur.

“Mrow!” Li’l Sunbeam rubbed his head against the pillow disdainfully.

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THE NEXT DAY, due to the events of the previous night, Mu Hanzhang couldn’t get out of bed because he was still indisposed. Jing Shao was pained beyond words, and he spoon-fed breakfast to Mu Hanzhang before reluctantly heading off to the battlefield.

Qin Zhaoran had gotten drunk the day before and had stayed over in the Amorphous Gardens. When he heard Mu Hanzhang was ill, he hurried over to check on him, but the guards stopped him outside the door.

“His Highness left instructions to let the princely consort rest and that no one is allowed to disturb him.”

Out of the room came Mu Hanzhang’s voice. “Is that you, Zhaoran? Let him in.”

Qin Zhaoran pushed the door open and went inside. Mu Hanzhang was half lying on the bed with a book in his hand.

“How did you suddenly fall ill?” Qin Zhaoran asked.

“It is a common occurrence.” Mu Hanzhang smiled. “You had a little too much to drink yesterday, so I didn’t have the chance to ask you. But now I’ll ask this plainly. Are you aware that the local government offices are taking a cut of the maritime merchants’ profits?”

“I’m aware of it, but I haven’t taken a single copper.” Qin Zhaoran glanced at the bluish-purple bite mark on his neck and felt a hint of bitterness rise in his chest.

Mu Hanzhang nodded. “There will be major happenings in Jiangzhou in the coming days. Do not get involved.”

***

IN THE FOLLOWING MONTH, Mu Hanzhang began to look for evidence that Jiangzhou officials were extorting maritime merchants, while Jing Shao continued to fight his laid-back war against Gu Huaiqing.

It wasn’t until Mu Hanzhang, having obtained sufficient evidence, surrounded the prefect of Jiangzhou’s residence with the vanguard battalion that he finally understood what that dark look in the first prince’s eyes was all about.

“You know, I happen to be the first prince’s maternal uncle. Even if you have no respect for me, Your Lordship should at least respect the prince. This is all so trivial and not really worth spoiling the harmony between the imperial brothers over, don’t you agree?”

The prefect of Jiangzhou looked coldly at Mu Hanzhang. This marquis had brought a mere hundred men, and with the forces he commanded, he was certain he could capture them.

When Mu Hanzhang saw the soldiers behind the prefect of Jiangzhou, he couldn’t help frowning. He never thought a minor prefect would have this much power, and the first prince was certainly aware of all this. Had he allowed Mu Hanzhang to come to Jiangnan because he was intending to have him dealt with right here?

Internally, he was calculating how long these one hundred men that Jing Shao had assigned him could hold out. The city of Jiangzhou was more than fifteen miles from Pingjiang. If he sent the Left Guardian back right now, would the army make it to them in time?

The prefect of Jiangzhou said, with a mirthless smile, “My advice to Your Lordship would be to put down that prized blade in your hand and come inside so we can talk things over. Otherwise, if we end up putting a scratch on that delicate skin of yours, it’d be hard for this one to explain it to His Highness, don’t you think?” He waved a hand to signal his men to seize this Marquis Wenyuan.

The plan had been to kidnap him and hide him somewhere. After two months without any progress on this expansion into maritime trade, His Majesty would then give up on the idea. But since someone had tipped Marquis Wenyuan off, and he’d even gotten his hands on evidence that could implicate the first prince, the only thing they could do now was to fight to the bitter end. As long as this Marquis Wenyuan was dead…

“When did First Brother get a prefect for an uncle? How did This Prince not know that?” From the back of the group came a bright voice as a black horse slowly trotted forward.

With a disdainful chuckle, Jing Shao dismounted and came to stand next to his consort.

“Prince— Prince Cheng!” As soon as the prefect of Jiangzhou saw Jing Shao, still clad in his armor, his heart instantly sank. “Weren’t— Weren’t you supposed to be on the battlefield?”

“Hmph.” Jing Shao put his arm around the man next to him and gave the signal with one hand. “Don’t let a single one of them escape.”

The soldiers behind them all charged forward while he grabbed Mu Hanzhang and mounted his horse, retreating to a safe distance to watch the show.

Meanwhile, Gu Huaiqing, who’d been abandoned on the battlefield halfway through their fight, got so mad that he tossed his long-handled saber to the ground.

Several days later, a memorial detailing how the first prince colluded with Jiangnan officials to accept bribes from maritime traders landed on Emperor Hongzheng’s desk.

Chapter 101:
The Twelfth Month

THE ISSUE INVOLVING the prefect of Jiangzhou had now been smoothly resolved. After all, Mu Hanzhang wasn't one of those fools who'd knowingly risk their own lives just to test the waters, and adhering to the strategy of striking first when the enemy remained still, he had unraveled the cocoon and found evidence against the bribe-takers one by one. Now that he'd caught the prefect of Jiangzhou, maritime trade could officially begin.

Tendrils of colorful clouds filled the evening sky they traveled under on their way home. Leaning back in Jing Shao's embrace, Mu Hanzhang studied the radiant sunset on the horizon as he pondered.

"Li'l Spoon, there's something I want to talk with you about."

"What is it?" asked Jing Shao, his arm wrapped around his consort.

In consideration for the troops following him, he did not urge Shadow to a gallop and instead was letting him trot slowly along.

"I want to build the trading office in Luzhou." Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips for a moment. "After all, it's close to the docks and more convenient for the merchants."

Jing Shao's brow furrowed at these words. Even though Luzhou wasn't far from Pingjiang, he'd be absent from dawn to dusk if he had to go to the office every day. Before he departed from the capital, Emperor Hongzheng had given him a strict order that under no circumstances could he allow Pingjiang to fall. Therefore, Gu Huaiqing could not be allowed to breach Pingjiang no matter what; his battles with King Huainan could only take him farther and farther from Luzhou.

Knowing that Jing Shao didn't want them to be apart, he tried his best to make him feel better by telling him the best part of it. Mu Hanzhang looked up at him. "I'll work only half days and hurry back at High Noon."

The truth was, there was nothing wrong with having the trading office in Pingjiang. Qin Zhaoran, being local, could handle low-volume transactions and any emergencies in Luzhou. But when he considered the mock fights between Jing Shao and Gu Huaiqing… If the office was built in the Amorphous Gardens, with all the foot traffic that would bring, it would be easy for someone to realize that something was off.

“Junqing,” Jing Shao said, holding the man in his arms more tightly, “are you still angry?”

“Hmm?” Mu Hanzhang paused, confused. What did this have to do with him being angry?

“I would never suspect that there’s anything going on between you and Qin Zhaoran. Really, I won’t,” Jing Shao said earnestly. “I just don’t want you to have to work so hard all the time.”

At the mention of Qin Zhaoran, Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help rolling his eyes. They were talking about something serious, but Jing Shao was once again getting sidetracked, so Mu Hanzhang shut his mouth once more and ignored him.

When Jing Shao looked down to find the man in his arms with his eyes closed as though he was tired, he unhappily pulled him closer so he could sleep a little more comfortably.

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BY THE TIME THEY GOT BACK to the Amorphous Gardens in the evening, Mu Hanzhang was genuinely exhausted, and he went to bed right after his bath. Li’l Sunbeam had also been washed until all fluffy and clean, and he followed his master to the bed all on his own. Ever since Jing Shao so thoughtlessly caused Mu Hanzhang pain, Li’l Sunbeam had been allowed on the bed to serve as a boundary between them. This had become habit after a month, and Li’l Sunbeam no longer cared for sleeping on the cold, hard ground of the ornamental garden.

When Jing Shao saw that pile of black-and-yellow fur on the bed after he came out of the bath, his expression turned into a scowl. After making Junqing angry that night, he had assumed it was all behind him once Junqing let him in; he never imagined that Junqing would bring the tiger to bed every night since then. For a whole month, he had been faced with a meal that he could see and touch but not eat. Heaven only knew that he was about to be sick from holding it in.

Jing Shao pushed the sprawled-out tiger further into the bed and lay down. “Junqing, I’ll have to drive Gu Huaiqing out from the Pingjiang territory in the next few days, and after that, I might be coming home even later.”

“Mm-hmm.” Mu Hanzhang lay in the inner half of the bed, absentmindedly stroking the tiger on the head. The great big tiger narrowed his eyes in contentment, his long tail swinging idly back and forth.

Jing Shao gazed at that smooth, jade-like hand with sad, pleading eyes, then shifted over to put his head against the tiger’s back, hoping that hand would pet him as well.

Mu Hanzhang glanced at the aggrieved expression on Jing Shao’s face but only pretended not to notice. He patted Jing Shao’s head once before turning over to sleep.

Jing Shao tugged on the tiger’s ear sulkily, and Li’l Sunbeam bared his teeth at him. Then, as if showing off, he put a paw pad against Mu Hanzhang’s back and rubbed his head contentedly against it, tilting his head in preparation for sleep.

For a long time, Jing Shao kept his eyes open, glaring at that ball of fur. He waited until the breathing of the man on the inner side of the bed grew even, then reached under the bed. He groped around, got a piece of spiced jerky, and waved it in front of the tiger’s nose. His happy snores came to an abrupt stop and a pair of amber-colored eyes snapped open in the dark, fixing on the swaying jerky. Just as he opened his mouth to eat it, the jerky was tossed a distance from the bed.

The great big tiger immediately chased the treat, leaping forward. Jing Shao shot him a glance and quickly claimed the center of the bed. He carefully reached toward the other side to gather the sleeping Mu Hanzhang into his arms. The man in his embrace shifted but did not wake; his slender,

supple body, warm in his sleep, had a faint, refreshing scent to it, and several strands of black hair were draped over his neck.

Jing Shao buried his nose into that warm neck, greedily breathing in, and softly murmured, “Once the battlefield moves away from Pingjiang, we’ll have even less time together if you go to Luzhou for work. How could you be so cruel to me…?” He whimpered and pulled the man closer to him. Nuzzling against his hair, Jing Shao fell asleep sulking.

Meanwhile, a smile slowly surfaced on the face of the man wrapped in his arms.

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THE NEXT DAY, Mu Hanzhang tasked the servants to tidy up the Amorphous Gardens’ front court, preparing it for its conversion into a trading office. Meanwhile, Jing Shao took Li’l Sunbeam over to the Wading Gardens, on the pretext that he was going to learn hunting from the lion.

In the fourteenth year of Hongzheng, during the Eighth Month, Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, led his vanguard battalion to resist King Huainan’s invasion in Jiangnan. What began as a campaign to abolish the feudatory had turned into a counter-invasion of Jiangnan’s heartland due to the blunders committed by the fourth prince, Jing Yu. Emperor Hongzheng issued an edict to recall the fourth prince and publicly rebuked him in morning court for his arrogance and glory-seeking behavior, ordering him to reflect on his actions at the Ancestral Shrine.

In the same year, Ninth Month, Marquis Wenyuan completed an investigation against the prefect of Jiangzhou for extorting maritime merchants as well as secretly raising a private army. Emperor Hongzheng issued an edict for a thorough investigation, and a formal indictment was filed against the first prince for his connections to the prefect of Jiangzhou.

The prefect of Jiangzhou’s son knelt in the first prince’s estate, speaking through bitter tears. “Your Highness, we’re family! You can’t just ignore me!”

“He’s a worthless fool unfit for big things. How did he manage to fail at capturing a powerless scholar?!” Jing Rong looked coldly down at his younger cousin kneeling at his feet. “Head back for now. I know how to handle this.”

Once his noisy maternal relative was gone, the first prince, Jing Rong, sat down before his desk and added this to the end of his memorial: *Your unworthy son asks with great trepidation that the prefect of Jiangzhou be executed.* Once the note was finished, he threw the jade-handled brush onto the bluestone tiles, shattering it into pieces.

By the Tenth Month, the Luzhou harbor was fully renovated. Marquis Wenyuan, Mu Hanzhang, established the new trade office in Pingjiang’s Amorphous Gardens, specializing in the trade of goods with foreign merchants and the collection of the maritime export tariff.

The war continued into the Twelfth Month before they managed to reclaim one city. Prince Cheng submitted a memorial to the throne, stating that due to attrition under the fourth prince’s command, a great number of horses and weapons had been lost, and thus he was formally requesting that the Ministry of Revenue allocate funds so they could replenish the horses and equipment.

Jiangnan’s winter wasn’t warm, and all the flowers had withered in the Amorphous Gardens save for several wintersweet at the height of their bloom. As the maritime traders returned home one after another at the end of the year, the trade office was far less busy, so Mu Hanzhang started instructing the servants to start preparing for the Spring Festival without worry.

All was peaceful and harmonious within the city of Pingjiang; the people were entirely unaffected by the war, and they were each joyfully getting ready for the New Year festivities. King Huainan was well-regarded in the Jiangnan region, so when the commoners heard that King Huainan was the one attacking the city, they were not particularly worried. In fact, the news that Prince Cheng was coming to lead the troops had them nervous for quite a while.

On the 7th of the Twelfth Month, Mu Hanzhang finished checking the ledgers and said to the Amorphous Gardens’ steward, “For the Laba Festival tomorrow, set up a porridge stall outside the city.”

The steward was a local and knew a great deal about the city. “Certainly, Your Lordship,” he said. “But in the past, all the wealthy merchants in the city would set up porridge stalls in front of their own residences. Why are we putting ours outside the city?”

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glance. “Because all the people who fled the war and headed to Pingjiang are outside the city gates.”

Understanding what the princely consort wanted immediately, the steward turned away to see it done. During the past six months, the populace had witnessed Prince Cheng’s conduct with their own eyes, and with Mu Hanzhang’s intentional efforts to protect his reputation, their views toward Prince Cheng had changed considerably.

A bright, pleasant voice rang out behind Mu Hanzhang. “So there’s porridge being served tomorrow? I’ll go get myself a bowl—”

But before the speaker managed to finish their sentence, another familiar voice had already interrupted. “You’ll have to pay first.”

Jing Shao shot a glare at the person who constantly showed up around his consort whenever he didn’t have his eye on him. That man smiled and chose a random seat in front of Mu Hanzhang’s desk. Astonishingly, it was the very same King Huainan who was supposed to be locked in a fierce battle with Prince Cheng.

Gu Huaiqing picked up a ledger and flipped through it with something almost like a smile on his face. “The funds allocated by the capital for provisions are already here. I wonder if my share of it is enough to buy a bowl of porridge?”

“It should be enough.” Jing Shao snatched the ledger from him and said to his consort, “Just transfer the amount directly to us and give him ten taels of silver in change.”

Mu Hanzhang smiled through pursed lips. “It’s a risk having you two lurking here so openly. Someone might catch sight of you.”

Gu Huaiqing petted Li’l Sunbeam, who looked listless sprawled out next to the heating stove. “I’ve come to collect this little guy and bring him to the Wading Gardens.” Ever since the weather started to cool, the cold-averse tiger hadn’t wanted to leave the heating stove even momentarily.

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LI'L SUNBEAM immediately perked up when he reached the Wading Gardens' heated nook, and he strutted around the mist-shrouded garden with its steaming hot spring, inspecting the whole place as if on patrol. Then he ran off to find the little lion sleeping in the center of the garden.

Lions matured slower than tigers, so right now Li'l Sunbeam was a whole size bigger than the lion cub. When he sprawled on top of the lion, his thick fur completely concealed the smaller short-haired lion, leaving just his head exposed, which got relentlessly hugged and gnawed upon. Jing Shao had sent him here every few days through autumn so that he could learn how to hunt from the lion, but Li'l Sunbeam never did learn how. He had instead picked up the lion's habit of sleeping all the time.

Gu Huaiqing watched the two furballs rolling around in the garden and did not take the banknotes Mu Hanzhang was handing to him. "Did I hear that you're planning to do some maritime trading yourself in the coming spring?"

Mu Hanzhang exchanged a look with Jing Shao, then slowly said, "Not exactly. We're just opening a shop called the Treasure Emporium that will help foreign merchants off-load their goods."

This was an avenue of business Mu Hanzhang came up with after managing maritime trade for half a year. Having traveled half the world to get here, the foreign merchants had already spent a great deal of time at sea; unfamiliar with the empire, they had no idea how to sell their cargo. Most of the merchants doing business with maritime merchants were small businesses that couldn't purchase a whole ship's cargo all at once. So he planned to open up a Treasure Emporium in Luzhou with his own money, which would specialize in purchasing large quantities of foreign goods to sell to merchants of the Chen Empire at a markup.

"Is it all right if I take my share of the provisions money to buy a share of your business?" Gu Huaiqing said with a smile.

Mu Hanzhang had just been troubled about Jing Shao's share of the money still being insufficient and had been considering putting in the hundred thousand taels of silver his mother had given him. Gu Huaiqing's suggestion happened to solve this immediate problem.

"If you trust me with your money, that would of course be most welcome."

"By the way, has Jing Chen written recently?" Gu Huaiqing asked, with seeming nonchalance.

Jing Shao cast a look toward him. "Brother sends us a letter every ten-day period." He asked his consort, as if he didn't already know: "The most recent one should be arriving today, right?"

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips to stifle a laugh. "It got here first thing this morning." Saying so, he produced a letter from his sleeve.

Chapter 102:
Cutting Down Grass

"LET ME SEE!" Gu Huaiqing immediately reached out to grab it, but Jing Shao snatched it away with lightning-fast reflexes.

"I haven't read it yet!" He hopped onto the stone table in a few quick steps and stood high above Gu Huaiqing.

There was never a single superfluous line in Jing Chen's letters. He described the situation in the capital succinctly. Though Jing Rong was ultimately able to shake off his involvement in the Jiangnan incident due to his willingness to "place justice above kinship," it was undeniable fact that he had fallen out of His Majesty's favor, so he'd gotten much more restrained at morning court.

The fourth prince had been sent to the Ancestral Shrine for reflection, and though he'd been reflecting for several months by now, Emperor Hongzheng did not appear to have any intention of bringing him back. And while Jing Yu remained away from court, his followers were being exposed one by one. As they neared the end of the year, another batch of them had been recently "dealt with."

Jing Shao's brows furrowed, and he read it again. "What made Father become suspicious of Jing Yu?"

He had thought Emperor Hongzheng was merely trying to knock some sense into the fourth prince, but judging by how the tides were turning, it sure sounded like he was trying to eliminate him.

"The trigger was that vice minister of rites, Zhao Jiulin." Mu Hanzhang thought for a moment and turned to ask Gu Huaiqing, "Brother, is there something special about this Zhao Jiulin?"

"He's nothing special, just a weathervane that turns with the wind." Gu Huaiqing swiped the letter from Jing Shao the moment he wasn't looking. "Suspicion, once awakened, can never be quieted again."

Once awakened, suspicion can never be quieted again… Once awakened…can never be quieted again… Jing Shao stood frozen for a long moment, then a trace of a bitter smile showed on his face.

In his past life, just one small mistake he made led to someone finding out about his trading in salt permits, and things quickly spiraled out of control after that; he couldn't even remember when he even committed half the crimes in all the charges leveled against him.

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IN THE RITE OF LUAN PALACE, the empress was showing Emperor Hongzheng a set of new garments. She said wistfully, "I had new clothes made for all the princes, but since Jing Yu is not in the palace, I have no way of letting him try them on, so I don't even know if they will fit him."

Emperor Hongzheng shot her a glance but did not say anything.

Met with awkward silence, the empress consort inwardly panicked, yet she forced a smile. "Your Majesty, it's almost time for the Spring Festival. I was wondering if we could maybe bring Jing Yu back and at least let him spend it in the palace before sending him back out."

"Jing Shao also isn't spending Spring Festival in the palace, so why didn't you say you wanted to bring him back as well?" scoffed Emperor Hongzheng.

"Prince Cheng is fighting for the country, so naturally he can't just come back." Inwardly, the empress gritted her teeth.

Why would he bring up Jing Shao over this? How could he compare her son to that worthless fool who couldn't even inherit the throne?

"We know how best to handle this. Your meddling is unnecessary." Emperor Hongzheng immediately got up and walked out.

The Rite of Luan Palace was growing more tedious by the moment; the front court of the palace was all about politics, but now the harem was too. He had quite enough of being endlessly pestered.

The empress consort watched helplessly as His Majesty walked out of the Rite of Luan Palace, so angry that she clutched the silk handkerchief in her hand tight. Lately, His Majesty had grown increasingly short with her whenever she talked.

She pointed at one of the palace eunuchs and said, “You. Go figure out which palace His Majesty is visiting today.”

“Certainly!” the young eunuch near her whispered and darted out.

It wasn’t long before he hurried back. “Your Majesty, His Majesty has gone to the Palace of Virtuous Bloom.”

“Zhuo Shulan, that slut!” The empress’s gaze was sharp as she threw a delicate white jade cup to the floor. “A slut who lost His Majesty’s favor long ago! How dare she show her face to seduce him again!”

***

IN THE PALACE OF VIRTUOUS BLOOM, the Pure Consort was reading a message Prince Rui had managed to send into the palace, and she was smiling so wide that her beautiful eyes turned to new moons. She’d just found out last month that her nephew Zhuo Yunji was somehow the newly crowned Tertius Flower Ma Zhuo. She had been melancholic and withdrawn ever since the Zhuo clan fell from grace, but now that the Zhuo clan had a successor, they had a chance to rise again, and she finally saw hope.

“Mother!” Seventh Prince Jing Yi ran into his mother’s palace as soon as he finished his studies. With a clumsy, bobbing gait, the portly little boy ran headlong into his mother’s arms.

The Pure Consort burned the letter she held over a candle flame before she looked down and wiped the boy’s face with a handkerchief. “You’re being naughty again!”

“Mother, I want to go to Jiangnan and fight at Third Brother’s side!”

Ever since Jing Yi saw Jing Shao in that study, he’d been captivated by his elder brother’s heroic bearing and had sworn to become a great hero

like Prince Cheng.

“His Majesty has arrived!” There was sudden loud announcement outside the door, and the Pure Consort hurriedly pulled Jing Yi down to kneel and greet the emperor.

Emperor Hongzheng walked in with a cheerful grin. “Jing Yi wants to become a great general?”

The Pure Consort rose with a smile and pushed the hand-warming stove she held into Emperor Hongzheng’s hands. “He’s been clamoring about wanting to go to war every day since he saw Prince Cheng that time. I’ve got a headache from all the noise.” She stood on tiptoe to help him take off his fur cloak.

As Emperor Hongzheng was attended to in a way that brought him real contentment, the look on his face brightened further. The sight of the Pure Consort, still young and demure, inevitably reminded him of the late empress. Back then, the Rite of Luan Palace was just as warm and pleasant.

“Have you ever blamed us for what happened to the Zhuo clan?”

The Pure Consort’s hands paused in their motions. Then she smiled and said, “Honor or disgrace, prosperity or decline, everything is granted by heaven’s will. I am already deeply grateful that Your Majesty did not demote my rank as a consort. How could I ever blame you?”

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THE PALACE GOT THROUGH the fourteenth year of Hongzheng in a state of peace. Or at least, it seemed peaceful enough on the surface. Emperor Hongzheng ultimately did not bring the fourth prince back to the palace, and rumors began to circulate within the imperial court that Jing Yu had lost His Majesty’s favor entirely and likely had no hope for the throne.

While Emperor Hongzheng was at the Temple of Heaven for the spring Sacrifice to Heaven,[4] he brought Jing Yu back with him, since he was nearby. But the situation at court had changed drastically. Jing Yu’s adherents had largely been removed, and even those in the reformist faction

who did not take sides were noticeably more courteous to Prince Rui than before, already treating him as the crown prince in all but name.

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JING YU PACED BACK and forth in the Rite of Luan Palace. “Mother, if things continue the way they are, we’ll all be finished!”

The empress consort stayed silent, the handkerchief in her hand clutched unbearably tight. The latest rumors at court said that the Pure Consort was now in favor, and some had even begun to quietly support the seventh prince. How absolutely absurd!

But the turmoil in the capital did not reach Jiangnan at all. To Jing Shao, the days passed by one after the other, peaceful and pleasant.

It had taken him so long to fight the Huainan fiefdom in his past life that Jing Shao wasn’t at all worried about taking things slowly this time around. Following the same schedule as in his past life, Prince Cheng fought valiantly each day, giving his best.

With sufficient capital and collaborative efforts between merchants and government officials, the Treasure Emporium opened its doors without a hitch. Since trade with foreigners was lucrative, and their business was high volume, it earned back its capital within a year. Taking away the money set aside for King Huainan’s dividends, Jing Shao also secured funds to maintain his unauthorized militia. It would be far too conspicuous for them to have a monopoly, so Mu Hanzhang registered the Treasure Emporium under the name of a generational maritime merchant family and allowed several other clans to open similar shops. However, none did as well as the Treasure Emporium.

Peaceful days always went by in a flash, and before they knew it, another year had passed. It was now the sixteenth year of Hongzheng; Li’l Sunbeam had grown into a big Sunbeam, and they heard that Mu Longlin could already say the words “big brother.”

In the courtyard, Jing Shao lounged on a bamboo daybed, slowly sipping at a cup of osmanthus wine. Sunbeam lay on the floor on his back, rolling left and right as he scratched at the frayed bamboo edges of the bed.

Mu Hanzhang stepped out of the house with a letter in his hand, looking a bit solemn. “Brother has sent another message.”

“What’s the matter?” The dark look on his consort’s face immediately made Jing Shao sit up, and he pulled Mu Hanzhang onto the daybed. He took the letter, and an odd look came over him when he read it. “He’s asking us about the medicinal powder from that nun?”

Mu Hanzhang nodded. The tone in Jing Chen’s letter was quite cautious; he was actually inquiring about the “incense ash” that the now-deceased Mobei had given Prince Rui’s fourth son.

“I actually did keep half of it.” Mu Hanzhang produced a small porcelain bottle, which was half of the powder he’d poured out from that yellow paper packet. He’d taken it to Jiangnan with them, lest someone search their residence and find this while they were gone.

Chapter 103:
Last Stand

JING SHAO FROWNED. “Get the messenger to bring it along with our return letter to him, then.”

Had something else happened in the Prince Rui Estate?

“We mustn’t.” Mu Hanzhang unfolded the letter and read it carefully again. Jing Chen’s words were filled with caution, as if it wasn’t only about what happened at the Prince Rui Estate. “Write back to him and say we still have half a package of the ash, but otherwise don’t say anything else about it.”

Jing Shao nodded. Even though he had no idea what happened, he could never go wrong by doing as his consort told him. He remembered nothing about this medicinal powder from his past life, but of course, it could be because he’d still been stuck in Xinan fighting a war, so he’d simply had no time for such domestic troubles.

The letter went to the capital and seemed to vanish. They received no reply, and even as the end of the next ten-day period rolled around, Jing Chen’s scheduled letter never arrived either.

Gu Huaiqing, who came every ten days to wait for Jing Chen’s letter, felt a little unsettled. “Something must have happened in the capital. My people haven’t sent any new information either.”

A bad feeling settled over Mu Hanzhang from these words. The empress consort and the fourth prince had been far too quiet this past year, while Prince Rui remained the undisputed center of attention. This was plainly dangerous for him, but knowing how prudent Jing Chen was, he would never do anything to draw attention to himself, so someone with ulterior motives must have been deliberately singing his praises.

Jing Shao sprang to his feet. “No, I must return to the capital and check on him.” If something happened to his brother, then everything he was doing now would be completely meaningless.

A bodyguard hurried inside to report. “Your Highness, a detachment of mounted soldiers has entered the city.” The group appeared extremely formidable, and they showed the token of the imperial family, so the gatekeepers didn’t dare try to stop them.

“Damn fool, can’t even guard a door properly.” Jing Shao kicked away the small table at his feet, then grabbed his spear and started walking outside.

The empire’s army was stationed in the city of Pingjiang; who’d dare barge in so brazenly?

He’d just reached the main gates when he heard a neat clatter of hooves. A group of riders reined in their horses in front of the Amorphous Gardens. The horses reared their front hooves, letting out a series of clear neighs.

The leader of the group was clad in mustard-colored martial attire and bore stern, imposing features that commanded respect even before he spoke. He looked a lot like Jing Shao, but his gaze was as bright and penetrating as blazing torches, and he had a remarkably composed demeanor. Who else could it be, if not Jing Chen?

“Brother!” Jing Shao exclaimed in surprise.

When Mu Hanzhang and Gu Huaiqing heard the commotion, they ran out of the house as well, only to find Jing Chen sitting up on a magnificent horse with almost twenty men clad in black behind him, their breathing steady, their very presence intimidating to behold.

When Jing Chen saw his younger brother, he finally let his guard down. Suddenly, his vision went black, and he started toppling off his saddle.

“Brother!” Jing Shao ran up to catch him, but someone else was even quicker than he was. Gu Huaiqing leaped into the air and unerringly caught Jing Chen in his arms.

The black-clad men dismounted one after another and saluted Jing Shao. “We are the Riders of Inkcloud Eighteen and have escorted His Highness Prince Rui to Pingjiang under His Majesty’s orders.”

The Inkcloud Eighteen? Jing Shao couldn’t help glancing them over again. He knew about this group of riders; they were the masters of martial arts among the Imperial Guard and only took orders from Father.

Gu Huaiqing caught the faint scent of blood on the man in his arms and let out a startled cry. “He’s injured!”

“Hurry and take him inside,” Mu Hanzhang ordered.

He sent someone to fetch a doctor at once and arranged lodgings for the eighteen riders so that they could get some rest. Meanwhile, Jing Shao quickly followed his brother and Gu Huaiqing inside.

Jing Chen woke up as soon as he was placed on the bed. Putting an arm between himself and the uncomfortably close Gu Huaiqing, he pushed himself to sit up.

Jing Shao pushed the obstructing Gu Huaiqing out of the way and sat down by the bed. “Brother, where are you hurt?”

Jing Chen shook his head. “Nonstop travel is a bit tiring, but I’m fine.” At the utterly unconvinced looks on the two people’s faces next to the bed, he acquiesced by pulling up a section of his sleeve to show them his forearm, wrapped in white bandages. “We were ambushed along the way, but it’s just a minor injury.”

Jing Shao checked him over and only dropped the issue once he confirmed that there were no other injuries.

After taking the tea from the servants, Mu Hanzhang dismissed them all and carried it in on his own. “I’ve settled the Inkcloud Eighteen in the guest courtyard. They insisted on coming over to stand guard, but I persuaded them otherwise.”

Jing Chen nodded, took the tea from him, and drank a full cup.

After producing a small green jade bottle, Jing Shao re-bandaged his brother’s wound. “Did something happen in the capital?”

“Someone at court accused you of intentional underperformance, so Father sent me to act as your supervising officer.” Jing Chen’s eyes were deep and unreadable; it was obviously more complicated than that.

When Jing Shao heard this, he was utterly infuriated. “This Prince has taken back two cities in two years, and they still think it’s too slow? If

they think they can do a better job, why don’t they send Jing Yu?”

When he’d fought King Huainan in his previous life, those people had made the same argument, and the first and fourth prince had alternately taken a crack at it, but neither could counter even a single attack from King Huainan. Ultimately, he was the one who had to clean up their messes.

“That’s what he’s saying outwardly. But in reality, Father has asked me to personally retrieve that half bottle of medicinal powder,” Jing Chen said, turning toward Mu Hanzhang.

Taken aback, Mu Hanzhang did not head off to retrieve the powder. Instead, he strode along the bed’s side and came to stand behind Jing Shao. “What does Father need it for?”

This incident had to do with the harem within the Prince Cheng Estate, so how did it end up involving Emperor Hongzheng?

Jing Chen shook his head and cast his eyes downward. “Father was in a great hurry for me to leave. He didn’t even let me return to my estate before sending me out of the city with the Inkcloud Eighteen.”

Jing Shao exchanged a look with his consort, and they both could read the uncertainty and fear in each other’s eyes. It didn’t sound like Father was sending him on some errand. It looked more like he was being escorted out of the city under guard like a convict!

After remaining silent for a time, Jing Chen slowly gave a brief account of recent events.

When Jing Chen had Mobei’s social ties investigated just after his fourth son’s death, he found out that she was close to the wives of many noble houses. Because Jing Chen thought there was something suspicious about her, he did a more thorough investigation and discovered that one of her frequent contacts was Duchess Mao. However, that was where the leads ended.

Then, not long ago, a young concubine of Duke Mao’s suddenly suffered a massive hemorrhage during childbirth, resulting in the death of both mother and child, and people started saying that it was a lot like what happened to the late empress many years ago.

On the outside, this sounded like a topic best relegated to idle gossip, but Jing Chen had a hunch that it was far more complicated, so he had asked the Pure Consort to bring it up as though it was gossip in front of Emperor Hongzheng. To their surprise, Emperor Hongzheng's face suddenly went dark, and he set Jing Chen to investigate this incense ash at once. Alas, despite searching all over the capital, he could no longer find any trace of it.

After Jing Chen finished telling them the story, everyone's brows only furrowed deeper. Far from being resolved, this incident had become even more convoluted, and none of them could make sense of it.

Seeing the weariness on Jing Chen's face, Gu Huaiqing spoke up. "Let's not think about this for now. Jing Chen must be exhausted from traveling day and night to get here. Whatever it is, we can talk about it tomorrow." He ushered Prince Cheng and his consort out of the room, while he seemed to have no intention of leaving at all.

Jing Chen shot a look at him. "You too."

Gu Huaiqing laughed sheepishly a couple of times before Jing Shao yanked him away, clearly delighting in his misfortune.

Something must have happened in the capital as there had been no new edicts from His Majesty. Though Father said he was sending Jing Chen here to supervise the military, he didn't specify how long he was to stay. However, Jing Chen seemed happy enough to settle in while he was here and didn't seem worried at all. He toured around Pingjiang and even made a trip to Luzhou, where he carefully read Mu Hanzhang's amended trade regulations and pointed out many aspects that Mu Hanzhang hadn't considered.

Meanwhile, Gu Huaiqing abandoned his duties on the battlefield and volunteered to be the pageboy accompanying Jing Chen as he ambled about the city. Jing Shao was soon bored by fighting alone, so he left their generals on the battlefield to set up formations and fight each other, while he holed up at home training the tiger and keeping his princely consort company.

"The assassins who ambushed Brother along the way were all killed by the Inkcloud Eighteen."

Mu Hanzhang glanced at the eighteen men practicing martial arts nearby. These men were devoted in their service to His Majesty, so if he was sending them to keep Prince Rui safe, it meant that Emperor Hongzheng wasn't trying to punish Jing Chen in any way.

Jing Shao polished the sword in his hand. "It doesn't take much to figure out who sent them."

Even though Father seemed to be protecting his brother, given the strange condition under which he had to leave the capital, he was in no way comfortable letting Jing Chen return by himself.

"I think…" Mu Hanzhang looked at the eighteen extremely formidable martial artists, then at the legendary sword in Jing Shao's hand; he seemed to be deep in thought.

"Hmm?" Jing Shao slid the sword back into its scabbard and looked up at his consort.

Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips. "Maybe Father told him to come see you because he wants *you* to protect him."

This sounded a bit hard to believe, however, as with the power of an emperor, protecting Jing Chen should be an easy task. So why would he go through so much trouble?

"Huh?" Jing Shao opened his mouth in surprise, then immediately let out a disdainful snort.

When had his father ever considered stuff like that? If he'd ever thought of protecting his sons, he wouldn't have been taken out of his prison cell so easily and forced to seek his death on the cliffs of Mount Fengyue.

"Your Highness, Your Highness, something terrible has happened!" The soldier guarding the door stumbled in. "Someone's here from the capital to announce an imperial edict, and they've brought a prisoner cart with them!"

"What?" Mu Hanzhang immediately stood up.

A prisoner cart! Why would they bring a prisoner cart? Could it be that their collusion with King Huainan had been exposed? Despite himself, he clutched Jing Shao's hand tight.

Jing Shao reassuringly turned his hand over and held his. “Where are they now?”

“They’re already at the gates! They ran right into Prince Rui!”

This was why he was panicking—when the man leading that group saw Prince Rui, he did not enter the Amorphous Gardens and instead simply unrolled the edict. This visitor was clearly hostile.

On the contrary, this actually calmed Jing Shao down; with one hand on his sword and one hand holding the hand of his consort, he said quietly, “Let’s go see.”

When the two got to the front gates, they saw Gu Huaiqing standing in front of Jing Chen with his sword drawn, facing down more than twenty men in military uniforms behind an official announcing an imperial edict, a wooden prisoner cart behind them. Two men holding shackles tried to step forward but were forced back by Gu Huaiqing’s sword. It seemed an extremely tense situation.

“Is Your Highness attempting to defy an imperial edict?” The official speaking looked unfamiliar and was unlikely to be a senior court official of third rank or above.

“Call the eighteen riders,” whispered Jing Shao into Mu Hanzhang’s ear.

Mu Hanzhang nodded and turned, heading back into the courtyard.

“What’s in this imperial edict? This Prince shall have a look.”

Jing Shao reached out to take it, and the official, who seemed to have no fear of him, handed over the yellow silk scroll. Jing Shao glanced down at it; the handwriting was clearly not Emperor Hongzheng’s, but it was stamped with the heirloom seal of the realm, which did not appear to be forged.

“His Majesty has issued an order for us to escort Prince Rui back to the capital as soon as possible. Prince Cheng, please do not make things difficult for us,” the official said with a fake smile that did not reach his eyes. “Prince Rui has attempted to poison his father, and thus has committed treason and usurpation, which are unforgivable offenses. If Your

Highness tries to interfere, you will be punished as if you have committed the same crimes.”

Jing Chen was thunderstruck when he heard these words—had his father sent him to investigate the medicinal powder because he'd ingested it himself?

Jing Shao let out a derisive huff and drew his sword with a flourish.

"Jing Shao, don't be rash!" Jing Chen shouted for him to stop, then gently pushed Gu Huaiqing's sword-wielding hand aside. "I'll go with them."

"No!" Gu Huaiqing moved to block them once more, refusing to let the man with the shackles approach Jing Chen no matter what.

"Treason and usurpation?" When Jing Shao heard these words, he felt as if all the blood in his body froze.

The gravest charge against him in his past life was treason and usurpation! Now, after he had managed to evade this accusation, it had somehow ended up on his older brother's head.

"Prince Cheng, you'd better think this through and not—" Before the official could finish his sentence, his eyes suddenly went wide, looking up at Jing Shao in disbelief, then looking down at himself. Blood instantly spurted from his neck as he met an untimely end.

Jing Shao calmly flicked the sword in his hand as if he'd merely chopped off a tree branch. All the soldiers escorting the prisoner cart fell at once into a panic.

Out of the courtyard came a deep, resonant shout as eighteen black-clad bodyguards came to surround Jing Chen. "Here stand the Inkcloud Eighteen. Who dares hurt Prince Rui?!"

With the bloodstained tip of his sword, Jing Shao pointed at the men in military uniforms. "Leave none alive."

"Leave one alive!" Mu Hanzhang hastily added.

Once the Inkcloud Eighteen procured Jing Chen's assent, they drew their blades in unison and, in the blink of an eye, dispatched the soldiers as if they were slicing melons and cutting vegetables, leaving only the burly man who held the shackles. The man was so frightened that his legs buckled, and he fell to his knees trembling, not a trace left of the vicious arrogance he'd shown earlier.

Jing Shao pressed his sword against the big man’s chin and asked coldly, “Who exactly are you people?”

The big man was so frightened that he stammered, and he told them everything he knew. “To— To reply to Your Highness, we’re prison guards from the Ministry of Justice, and the one who delivered the edict was a supervisor at the ministry.”

Mu Hanzhang came to stand next to Jing Shao. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t know, my lord. The supervisor said we need to go to Jiangnan to deliver an imperial edict, so I just followed along…” After saying this, the man suddenly collapsed. He’d fainted in fright. A puddle of yellow filth spread out beneath him.

Jing Shao immediately put his arm around his consort and retreated to the steps, then instructed the guards to lock this big guy away for now.

Back in the courtyard, Jing Chen took the imperial edict and examined it carefully, his brow slowly furrowing. “The seal is genuine.”

While the one who wrote the imperial edict wasn’t necessarily the emperor himself, it was an authentic imperial edict as long as it was stamped with the seal of the realm.

“We’ve already killed them either way,” said Jing Shao, sounding absolutely unconcerned. “If Father were to ask, we’ll just say they ran into the Huainan army along the way and King Huainan killed them.”

Gu Huaiqing’s face fell instantly at these words. “How much more are you planning to slander me?”

“You’re already a traitor to the empire regardless; one more crime won’t make a difference.” Jing Shao leaned against his consort, baring his teeth at King Huainan.

Sunbeam crawled onto the cushioned daybed and bared his teeth as well, only much more ferociously than Jing Shao.

His head throbbing, Mu Hanzhang stared at these three who seemed to have no idea how much of an impending disaster this was and sighed. He could only turn to Jing Chen. “If this imperial edict is real, what should we do?”

Jing Chen’s eyes were somber as he rolled up the imperial edict and slowly clutched it tight. “Without further information from the capital, there are only two possibilities: One, Father really does want to drag me back to face charges. Two, Father already had his powers seized by Jing Yu.” And since the Inkcloud Eighteen were still here, Emperor Hongzheng must have given them special instructions before Jing Chen left the capital. Thus the first option was unlikely.

“There is one other possibility.” Mu Hanzhang slowly stroked the tiger’s tail. “Father is also trying to figure out who the poisoner is.”

When they heard that, everyone seemed taken aback.

Jing Chen pondered this silently for a long while. “You’re right.”

The reason Father hadn’t allowed Jing Yu to return to his estate must have been because he’d grown suspicious of him, and with Emperor Hongzheng’s abilities to manipulate the court, he wouldn’t have allowed someone as incompetent as Jing Yu to seize his power even if he were gravely ill.

Mu Hanzhang turned to Jing Shao. “No matter which of these things are true, we need to return to the capital if we wish to find out.”

A cold gleam filled Jing Shao’s eyes. “I will take fifty thousand troops back with me. If all else fails, we’ll fight our way back into the imperial city!”

Chapter 104:
Proclamation

FOR ONCE, Jing Chen did not reprimand Jing Shao for speaking recklessly, but he remained silent for a long time. If this edict wasn't Emperor Hongzheng's decree, then the fourth prince must have usurped the throne, and as princes outside the capital, it was their duty to return to purge the court of traitors. But if the imperial edict was genuine and if Emperor Hongzheng genuinely suspected him, then returning to the capital by himself would be a death sentence.

Mu Hanzhang glanced at Jing Shao and let out a light sigh. "Things have already come to this. The only way to snatch a sliver of hope is to go all in."

Prince Rui's aptitude made him the unquestionable choice for crown prince, so they'd assumed that as long as they remained cautious and kept a low profile, he would succeed the throne without obstacles once Emperor Hongzheng passed away. Never once had they imagined that such a catastrophe would befall them. However, since the dawn of history, few succession fights had ever been peaceful. Hadn't they made all their preparations precisely because such a calamity might arise?

Jing Shao read the look in Mu Hanzhang's eyes and took his lustrous, slender hand. He then turned once again to his brother, who was still as steady as Mount Tai. This time, he was certain he could keep these two safe with the military power in his grasp.

"We'll go," said Jing Chen finally, his voice deep and steady, putting one at ease. "Better to die in honor than live in disgrace!"

There was no time to lose. To escort his brother back to the capital, Jing Shao split the eighty thousand troops in Jiangnan, leaving behind thirty thousand and taking the rest, plus the five thousand from the vanguard battalion. Gu Huaiqing wanted to come along as well, but this was unanimously vetoed by the other three. Emperor Hongzheng was at his most distrustful; were he to see King Huainan, Jing Chen would be left with no choice but to forcefully seize the throne.

The Huainan fiefdom was situated in a peculiar location. Using it as a starting point, an army could march directly into the heart of the empire. If an army wanted to capture the capital, there were basically no natural barriers in the way. Jing Shao never understood why the empire's founder entrusted such a dangerous fief to the ancestor of King Huainan, but regardless of his reasons, this putative flaw left by the ancestor was now benefiting him greatly.

Just as they expected, they were met with constant ambushes along the way, but these small groups of soldiers were simply no match for a whole army. It was smooth sailing through almost three hundred miles of level plain, and Prince Cheng advanced with unstoppable momentum. The capital was thrown into turmoil at the news, and the first prince was sent to intercept Prince Cheng's army with troops.

"How large is the first prince's force?" Jing Chen asked when Mu Hanzhang climbed into the carriage.

"Less than thirty thousand." Mu Hanzhang, who'd gotten used to how Jing Shao fought, wasn't particularly worried.

Jing Chen put down the book in his hand, pondered for a moment, and nodded slightly.

Noticing that Jing Chen had been deep in thought a moment before, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help asking: "Brother, did you figure something out?"

"If it was Father who deployed the army of the Central Plain, he could mobilize a force of at least eighty thousand." When he realized that Mu Hanzhang understood at once, approval showed in Jing Chen's eyes, and he went on to explain how the Chen Empire's troops were distributed and mobilized.

Mu Hanzhang had spent much of the past few days sharing a carriage with Jing Chen. Neither man was talkative by nature, but their occasional conversations were always incredibly mutually beneficial. Mu Hanzhang, in particular, gained a much deeper understanding of a ruler's mindset, and only then did he realize that Jing Chen had been training in the ways of statecraft ever since he was a child.

Jing Chen glanced at his younger brother's distant figure. "Jing Shao is good at fighting, but he lacks proper understanding when it comes to anything else. Since you've decided to spend your life with him, please do be patient and watch out for him." Though his words sounded reproachful, his tone was full of a protective warmth.

"Brother, there's no need to worry. I assure you, I will not mistreat him." Having grown much closer to this brother over the past few days, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help joking around a little as well.

Jing Chen glanced at him, and a faint smile slowly spread across his face.

The neighing of a fine horse rang out, and Jing Shao shouted loudly from outside the carriage, "Brother, Junqing, come quickly and see what I've caught!"

At the noise, the two alighted from the carriage. Jing Shao was standing just outside with someone at his feet who was tied up like a rice dumpling with hemp rope, glaring at them with a sinister, defiant gaze. Who else could it be but the first prince, Jing Rong?!

Jing Chen quietly looked down at the man on the ground and asked in a deep voice: "Your Highness, has Father been poisoned?"

The first prince sneered and did not deny it. "Hmph, you traitors will meet a wretched end!" His glare was full of malice and madness.

Jing Chen closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Regicide *and* patricide. You two are mad beyond reason!"

"You sure know how to sling mud. Everyone knows that you're the one who can't wait to take the throne. Besides poisoning our father, do you also plan on doing violence to your brothers?" The first prince struggled, trying to lunge at Jing Chen, and Jing Shao kicked him down.

"Jing Yu just happened to send me the gift of a prisoner cart, so now I can pass it on to you, Your Highness."

Jing Shao picked up the man on the ground and tossed him to Zhao Meng and pointed at the prisoner cart nearby. It was the very same one brought by the messenger who delivered the imperial edict. Zhao Meng

wasted no time. He picked up Jing Rong with one hand, hoisted him over his shoulder, and strode toward the prisoner cart.

The Right Guardian went to watch, and as soon as he saw the first prince's face and how he looked like he was about to throw himself at someone to bite them, he couldn't help tossing in a couple of jabs. "These are the only two horse-drawn carriages in the army. Even Prince Rui and Marquis Wenyuan have to share one, but Your Highness gets one all to yourself. How remarkably kind of our prince."

Zhao Meng threw the man into the prisoner cart and slammed the door shut with a bang. "The moment Hao Dadao isn't here, you're running your mouth off."

Hao Dadao was the most upright out of the lot of them. Whenever the Right Guardian tried to be glib, he would inevitably get a lecture. The Left Guardian stood silently nearby watching them bicker, then stepped forward to fasten the padlock on the prisoner cart.

If Jing Shao bet on the wrong horse, what they were doing would be tantamount to treason, an armed uprising against the throne, and none of his generals would come out of it alive. So no matter how much Hao Dadao did not want to, Jing Shao had ordered him to stay and guard Jiangnan anyway. That way, if they failed, he wouldn't be implicated in their actions. Zhao Meng and the left and right guardians, however, insisted on following him no matter what, for they had been part of Prince Cheng's vanguard battalion from the very start, so they would be implicated anyway. They might as well remain loyal to the end.

Jing Chen shot a look at the chattering generals, then turned and got back into the carriage. Their journey ahead was long, and the situation was critical; there wasn't much time for them to waste.

"What insolence, Prince Cheng, to march back to the capital with an army!"

Thirty miles outside the capital was where Duke Mao's military power lay. Atop his steed, Jing Shao shot a look at the similarly mounted duke. His peerage was the highest among the nobles, and the troops under his command were thus stationed closest to the imperial city. The empress consort's choice to form a marriage alliance with his family certainly was a

wise one. However…judging by the cavalry behind Duke Mao, numbering fewer than ten thousand, it really wasn't all that impressive.

"This Prince has been told that an insurrection has broken out in the capital, so of course I must return to eliminate these traitors for my father," said Jing Shao righteously, pointing his silvery spear at Duke Mao's nose.

"Hmph, you and Prince Rui have plotted to usurp the throne, and His Majesty has already been made aware of it. I advise you to lay down your arms and surrender at once and return to the palace with me to confess your crimes. With His Majesty's benevolence, perhaps he may even choose to spare your lives," said Duke Mao, looking entirely confident.

Jing Chen stood by the carriage, staring coldly at Duke Mao. "As the army has returned to the capital, Father must have been informed. Duke Mao, why don't you present a handwritten decree written by my father? If so, my brother and I will submit to arrest without resistance."

Mu Hanzhang heard the sound of something whistling through the air and pushed Jing Chen aside. "Watch out!"

Jing Chen instantly reacted, his arms springing out to grab Mu Hanzhang, and the two of them tumbled to the ground as a pitch-black arrow struck straight into the spot where he'd just been standing.

With a grunt, Mu Hanzhang climbed to his feet, the stones on the ground cutting the smooth skin of his palm. Blood oozed, quickly staining his snow-colored sleeve.

When Jing Shao turned around and saw his consort injured, he instantly flew into a rage. "Junqing!"

By the time he looked back again, Duke Mao was already charging at him with his troops.

Jing Shao leaned backward on his horse, avoiding Duke Mao's slashing attack, then turned and whipped his spear shaft viciously in his direction. With a twist of his wrist, Duke Mao countered, blocking the attack with the back of his blade. The cavalry behind him had also charged forward, and the cries of slaughter and killing shook the skies.

The left and right guardians did not rush forward to join the melee; instead, they stayed close to either side of the carriage, cutting down all

cavalry who charged toward it.

Jing Chen pulled his brother-in-law off the ground and climbed to his feet, and the Inkcloud Eighteen quickly stepped forward to form a circle around them. Together with the mounted left and right guardians, they formed an unbreachable wall.

A younger Duke Mao had spent many years on the battlefield, and his martial skills far surpassed that of the first prince, who was lax in his training. Contending with him in a fight was no easy task for Jing Shao. Duke Mao's long-handled saber, etched with blue dragons, moved as nimbly as an extension of his arm, and each swing and chop carried tremendous weight.

Jing Shao blocked several attacks in a row with the shaft of his spear, but he was rattled so hard that the webbing of his thumb started going numb. As the cold, gleaming edge of the saber scraped against his silver spear, a whine pierced the air. Jing Shao spun his silver spear and locked the spearhead against the saber's blade, finally finding a moment to catch his breath.

Duke Mao stared at Jing Shao contemptuously. "Does Your Highness really think you're the number one warrior in all of the Chen Empire?"

In the eyes of veterans like them, the only reason Prince Cheng was repeatedly given the command of the troops was because his subordinates dared not claim the credit, pushing all their achievements onto him, making him seem far more formidable than he really was. When he was faced with true masters of martial arts, his only place on the battlefield was to take a beating.

Jing Shao watched Duke Mao with cold eyes, but he seemed a little exhausted, and the hand over his silver spear appeared to be trembling slightly. The smug satisfaction in Duke Mao's eyes grew even more pronounced, and he pressed his advantage further.

The silver spear bent toward Jing Shao, the saber's blade pressing it closer and closer to his neck, almost reaching it, when suddenly there was a ripping noise followed by the wet sound of blood spurting forth.

Duke Mao froze. He slowly looked down at his abdomen, slashed open by a sharp sword. He was momentarily unable to process what just

happened.

Holding his spear with one hand, Jing Shao swung it hard crosswise and knocked Duke Mao off his horse. The long-handled saber hit the ground, but its loud clatter was completely drowned out by the cries of battle surrounding them. Jing Shao flicked the blood off his sword and sheathed it. This old scoundrel was wrapped in metal armor from head to toe; even his neck had been protected, so it took him ages to notice the seam at his waist, where armor was joined with cloth.

“Duke Mao has already been executed. All of you, lay down your arms at once, or you will be dealt with as traitors to the state!” Jing Shao’s voice, fueled by inner force, spread in every direction.

Duke Mao’s solders were thrown into chaos while morale swelled on Prince Cheng’s side.

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SOON, THE BATTLE CAME to an end. Jing Shao quickly rushed to the carriage, squeezing past the Inkcloud Eighteen to fold his consort into his arms. “Where are you hurt? Let me see.”

“I’m fine—it’s just a scratch.” Mu Hanzhang raised his already bandaged left hand to show him. “Duke Mao’s goal was to kill Brother, and I’m sure that isn’t what Father wants.”

Jing Shao didn’t listen to him at all. “It’s such a deep cut. This won’t do; we’ll have to use that other ointment or it’ll scar.” So saying, he quickly unwrapped the bandage to apply his ointment.

Jing Chen shot a silent look at this younger brother, who’d forgotten all about his brother’s existence now that he had a wife, and turned to ask the Inkcloud Eighteen, “Before leaving the imperial city, did Father give you any additional instructions?”

The eighteen men in black looked at each other. One of them said, “To reply to Your Highness, His Majesty only told us to protect Your Highness and mentioned nothing else.”

Jing Chen looked at the man speaking to him with a grave expression. “That imperial edict states that This Prince is guilty of treason. Are you still intending to protect me?”

Throughout the journey from the capital and back, he’d never questioned these eighteen people; they had stayed by his side and served him all this time. It was precisely because of these eighteen riders that Jing Chen was so sure that his father had no plans to kill him. Now that they were about to enter the capital, many dangers could befall him, so he had to reaffirm where these people stood.

Jing Shao quietly signaled to the Left Guardian outside their encirclement. If there was any question about the riders’ loyalty, he would have them executed on the spot.

“We have never received any other orders. The eighteen of us would ensure Your Highness’s safety even if it costs us our lives,” responded that man without any hesitation.

The Inkcloud Eighteen said in unison, “We swear to protect Your Highness to the death!”

Jing Chen nodded faintly. Even in the face of Jing Shao’s army, they still unwaveringly declared their loyalty to Jing Chen, insisting that they only took orders from the emperor. In that case, Father’s intentions were made quite clear.

Jing Chen looked up and said to Jing Shao, “The army must not come within forty miles of the capital. Tell them to make camp here.”

Jing Shao’s brow furrowed. Duke Mao was dead, so it was true that there was no more military presence left in the city. But ten thousand imperial guards remained within the capital.

“Zhao Meng will remain here with the army. The vanguard battalion will follow This Prince to the main camp.” This was where Jing Shao regrouped with the vanguard battalion before every expedition.

It was dawn the next day by the time they made it to the main base camp, twenty miles south of the capital. Jing Shao hadn’t really wanted to leave the army behind; after all, they did not have a good grasp of what was going on inside the capital. He gently patted the man sleeping in his arms,

wanting to discuss how best to persuade his brother to take the army with them.

Long eyelashes fluttered as Mu Hanzhang slowly opened his eyes. Before he managed to say anything, they heard approaching hoofbeats. When they carefully looked in that direction, they were surprised to find that it was the Ministry of War's Minister Sun, charging in their direction with a detachment of the Imperial Guard.

Minister Sun dismounted and saluted. "This one greets Prince Rui, Prince Cheng, and Marquis Wenyuan!"

"Minister Sun, what exactly is going on?" Jing Shao asked. After so many days, he was finally seeing a friendly face.

The minister of war gestured for the guards behind him to halt, then walked to the front of Jing Chen's carriage on his own. Jing Shao immediately moved toward him on his horse but did not dismount; he simply rode up behind him and halted there.

"This one isn't sure either," Minister Sun said quietly. "It has been many days since His Majesty attended morning court, and all channels of communications have been sealed. Some days ago, the fourth prince suddenly announced that he would be acting as regent in His Majesty's stead."

"Then…you're here today because…" Mu Hanzhang frowned, wondering whose order it was that brought Minister Sun here.

"It was His Majesty's wishes," Minister Sun immediately replied, retrieving a handwritten imperial edict from his sleeve and handing it to Jing Chen with both hands.

Jing Chen unrolled it and examined it carefully. It was indeed Emperor Hongzheng's handwriting, instructing the two brothers to station their troops at their camp twenty miles away and enter the palace alone.

Jing Shao's brows furrowed, then he surreptitiously slipped a command token into the hand of the man in his arms. He whispered in Mu Hanzhang's ear, "In a little while, take the left and right guardians to that grove. As soon as you see a firework, lead the troops and charge into the palace."

Mu Hanzhang’s eyes widened, and he quietly hid his hand inside his sleeve. He slowly nodded, then gently squeezed Jing Shao’s palm. “Stay safe.”

Since it was Emperor Hongzheng’s decree, they could not disobey it. Jing Shao left Shadow with his consort, got into his elder brother’s carriage, and took only the Inkcloud Eighteen into the imperial city.

The whole palace was silent, and all the guards wore solemn expressions. As soon as they got off the carriage, they saw Anxian, the chief eunuch who served at Emperor Hongzheng’s side, standing quietly outside.

“Your Highnesses, please follow me.” For once, there was no smile on Anxian’s face.

He did not say more before leading the two of them toward Emperor Hongzheng’s bedchamber. As they were His Majesty’s bodyguards to begin with, no one tried to stop the Inkcloud Eighteen from coming along.

When they reached the foot of the marble steps, Anxian did not lead the two up; instead, he told the eighteen riders to remain at the bottom of the steps. He then took the two princes through a side door at the back of the grand hall. Eight tall bodyguards stood guard inside the door, and they asked the two to surrender all the weapons they carried.

Jing Shao frowned and was about to lose his temper when his elder brother grabbed his arm, signaling him not to act rashly. He then handed the small porcelain bottle in his lapel pocket to Anxian. “This is the item Father instructed This Prince to retrieve. Please deliver it to Father for me.”

The two of them were relieved of all of their weapons and were not even allowed to keep the jade-trimmed belts they wore. They walked inside with their clothes hanging loose and baggy.

The door behind them abruptly slammed shut with a clang. As Jing Shao got a clear look at their surroundings, all of the hair on his body instantly stood on end.

Before them was a long corridor lit with candles on both sides. It wasn’t dark, but now that they were unarmed, if they fell victim to any traps along this narrow path and died, they would never be found.

Jing Chen grew tense as well and moved closer to his younger brother. “Don’t panic. We should hasten our exit.”

Jing Shao nodded. “I’ll take the lead. Make sure you stay close behind me!” Then, with a *snap*, he broke off one of the candlesticks mounted to the wall. The hollow copper candlestick was about a foot long. It wasn’t much of a weapon, but it was better than nothing.

Jing Chen nodded and stuck closer to him. Together, they rushed toward the end of the corridor.

The corridor wasn’t all that long, but under these circumstances, it felt like it stretched on forever. As they got to its end, the wooden door opened on its own. Jing Shao immediately thrust the candlestick in front of him.

The light from beyond the door shone in, causing both of them to squint. Once they saw what was behind it, Jing Shao’s grip on the candlestick loosened, and it dropped to the floor near his foot.

The end of the corridor led to the inner chamber of the emperor’s chambers. When the two walked in, they came face-to-face with Emperor Hongzheng in bed.

“Get over here already,” he said, leaning against the headboard and shooting Jing Shao a glare.

The two brothers hurried over and knelt in front of the bed to pay their respects.

Anxian was already standing at his bedside as though he’d never left, and an imperial physician was also present, examining the small porcelain bottle.

Emperor Hongzheng paid no attention to what the imperial physician was doing and instead rested against the bolster pillow at the head of the bed with his eyes closed.

“Jing Shao, I heard you killed Duke Mao yesterday?”

“Yes.” Jing Shao had bowed his head. “Duke Mao led troops to stop your son from entering the capital and attempted to assassinate Prince Rui. Your son had no choice but to kill him.” There wasn’t a hint of apology in his words.

Somehow, Emperor Hongzheng did not reprimand him on the matter. He only asked, “Where is Jing Rong?”

“To reply to Father, First Brother and the army are both stationed forty miles outside the capital,” Jing Shao answered honestly. Of course, he did not mention that the first prince was in a prisoner cart.

“To report to Your Majesty,” said the imperial physician suddenly, “this drug is in fact an old folk remedy. A small amount can stop a high fever as it is extremely potent, and an overdose of it is akin to poison. There is no antidote… This humble one is useless, Your Majesty!” As he spoke, he fell to his knees with a thud and began to weep.

Emperor Hongzheng opened his eyes and quietly looked down at the two brothers kneeling by the bed.

Stunned, Jing Chen raised his head and turned to the imperial physician, then Emperor Hongzheng.

Jing Shao, too, seemed a little dazed.

“Your mother was poisoned by this very same drug,” said Emperor Hongzheng, taking the small porcelain bottle from the imperial physician and examining it carefully, ignoring the two brothers who had frozen as if struck by lightning. His voice was calm. “And now, I cannot escape from it either.”

“Father!” Jing Shao cried out in shock. In his previous life, Emperor Hongzheng had clearly outlived him, his own son. So what was all this about?

“Jing Shao, you have fought for the imperial family for many years, and none in the entire Chen Empire could call himself your equal,” Emperor Hongzheng said, his complexion rosy and his speech calm and measured, nothing like a man who had been poisoned. “We intend to pass the throne to you. Do you accept?”

Crash! It was as if a bolt of thunder had struck the crown of his head. This time, Jing Shao was well and truly dumbfounded. In his previous life, he had devoted himself wholeheartedly to the Chen Empire, only to end up discarded when he was no longer useful. In this life, he’d slacked off, shirked his responsibilities, and acted only out of self-interest, yet his father

was saying he wanted to give him the throne?! What an enormous joke this was.

Jing Shao fell silent for a time, and without looking at the expression on his brother's face, he said slowly, enunciating every word, "Father, your son will not accept!"

Emperor Hongzheng stared into Jing Shao's eyes. "Why is that?"

With his head held high, Jing Shao looked directly at his father. "Your son is nothing but a military general and has no knowledge about governing a country. And your son is devoted to Mu Hanzhang and only wishes to spend a lifetime together with him. If Father entrusts this vast empire to me, I fear I would only bring about its downfall in a single day!"

Emperor Hongzheng quietly watched him for a long moment, then slowly leaned back against the pillow, his voice tinged with a trace of fatigue. "Go ahead and read the edict."

As soon as he spoke, two people slowly walked out from behind the screen. They were the minister of personnel and the vice minister of personnel—Xiao Yuan.

Xiao Yuan held a long wooden box with both hands and followed behind the minister, his eyes looking straight ahead.

The minister of personnel produced an imperial edict and announced loudly, "Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, for insurrection and conspiracy against the throne, shall be taken to the imperial prison, never to be released for the rest of his life!"

Jing Chen's eyes widened, and he let out a plaintive cry. "Father!"

Emperor Hongzheng waved a hand to stop him from saying more. The minister of personnel put away the first imperial edict and took out another.

"Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, for being remarkably valiant in battle, shall have the Imperial Guard and Yulin Guard placed under his command before the new emperor ascends the throne. He is to be awarded the Sword of the Mandate, which grants him the authority to execute imperial descendants! On the day of the new emperor's ascension, he shall be further conferred the hereditary title of Imperial Prince Protector of the Realm."

Chapter 105:
The End

JING SHAO STARED BLANKLY ahead of him, unable to say a word. The two imperial edicts were each other's opposite. His father was trying to tell him that loyalty would bring him everlasting glory, while greed would ensure eternal ruin.

"Your mother gave you the name Shao in the hope that, like the nine variations of Xiao and Shao, you would bring prosperity and peace to the Chen Empire," Emperor Hongzheng sighed. "We have watched you grow from a wee one into an undefeated imperial prince. As your father, how could I not be pleased? But We are the emperor of the Chen Empire, and We must act for the good of the nation and its people. Even as emperor, We cannot do as We wish. We only hope that you can support each other as brothers should and not betray your mother's hopes for you both."

"Father…" Jing Shao raised his head, his eyes reddening. He'd never heard his father's praise like this before. It was the first time in two lifetimes that he'd received anything like this from him.

"The human heart is never satisfied. Ultimately, it all comes down to greed. Lately, We have been rather muddled, and We thought We heard the founder calling Our name. Last night, when We awoke, We reread the founder's personal notebook and realized that We have gone against what he wanted." Emperor Hongzheng exhaled and dug out a small yellowing booklet from beneath his pillow to hand to Jing Chen. When he spoke again, his voice was lower than before, almost breathless, raspy. "Regarding Huainan, go with the founder's last wishes. Do not force it."

Jing Chen took the booklet in silence. The founder's notebook was safeguarded by successive emperors of the Chen Empire. The significance of his father bestowing it on him could not be more evident.

Emperor Hongzheng waved, and the minister of personnel opened the third imperial edict. This time, though, the reading of it was nowhere near as smooth; he pronounced each word carefully, pausing at every phrase. "Prince Rui, Jing Chen, endowed with great wisdom and benevolence, who

obeys the mandate of heaven and is in harmony with the people's hearts, shall rightly inherit the throne, succeed Us, and ascend as Emperor."

Jing Chen silently took the proclamation and respectfully kowtowed three times to Emperor Hongzheng.

"We are entrusting the empire, the land, and its people to you. You must heed the admonitions of the founding emperor, govern diligently, love the people, and constantly reflect on yourself." Emperor Hongzheng's voice grew weaker and weaker as he took Jing Chen's hand into his own. "Jing Shao is your younger brother. If ever he commits any great wrong in the future, you must remember the brotherly love he displayed today by standing in front to protect you."

"Your son submits to this decree." For all his composure, Jing Chen was unable to stop the reddening of his eyes.

Jing Shao could hold back no longer. "Father!"

He walked over on his knees and leaned against his father's bedside. Which father under heaven did not cherish his children? But only now did his father lay bare how he truly felt about him. Even in his past life, hadn't his father shown him endless forbearance, leaving a path to survival again and again…?

"Take good care of our ancestor's legacy. Both your mother and I will…always be watching over you…" Emperor Hongzheng's voice gradually softened, as if he were recalling the graceful, stately late empress. There was even a hint of a smile at the corner of his lips.

In the sixteenth year of Hongzheng, Emperor Hongzheng passed away in the palace, aged forty-eight.

"Father!" Jing Shao clutched the corner of the quilt, unable to stop himself from wailing. The emperor had died; his father was gone. Even if he gave everything he had, ultimately, no one could wrest life from the hands of heaven.

Jing Chen pressed his lips tightly together, and his reddened eyes could finally hold his tears no longer. They slipped soundlessly from his cheeks.

“Your Majesty, please don’t cry yourself sick.” Anxian and the minister of personnel rushed forward to support Jing Chen, already changing the title they used to address him.

Xiao Yuan helped Jing Shao up and handed him an embroidered handkerchief. “Your Highness, please restrain your grief. You have a lot of work ahead of you.”

Jing Shao wiped his face with the handkerchief and let the servants straighten his clothes, then he took the Sword of the Mandate as it was handed to him. He asked, “Who poisoned him?”

The minister of personnel said, “As the late emperor was so ill, he did not have enough time to investigate the matter fully.”

Jing Shao shot a glance at him as if about to say something, but Jing Chen stopped him. “Anxian, bring all the princes here.”

“Certainly.” Anxian bowed and accepted the order, then turned to make the arrangements.

Jing Chen calmly and clearly assigned everyone’s duties. “Jing Shao, move quickly and dispatch the Yulin Guard. Father suddenly passing away may cause unrest.”

“Certainly,” Jing Shao replied, his grip tightening over the sword.

Just as he reached the door, Anxian came stumbling back in. “Your Highness, this is bad. The Yulin Guard has suddenly surrounded the Grand Hall.”

Anxian was quite flustered. The Yulin Guard had been transferred here to prevent any princes from staging a coup, but if the Yulin Guard itself was the one doing the staging, there would be no escape from them.

At this, Jing Shao did not ask for more details and simply darted out of the room.

At the bottom of the marble steps, the Yulin Guard marched in neat rows as they quickly approached the Grand Hall. The Inkcloud Eighteen had retreated onto the marble steps. Surprisingly, the captain of the Yulin Guard was absent, replaced by the deputy captain, Lin Gang.

Jing Shao looked coldly at the seemingly unaffected Yulin Guard and produced the arrow that acted as their command token. “Father has placed

the Imperial Guard and the Yulin Guard temporarily under This Prince's command. You are to hold the palace gates. No unauthorized persons are allowed to enter."

"Don't listen to his nonsense," someone said, as they slowly emerged out of the crowd on horseback. It was the fourth prince, Jing Yu. "Prince Rui and Prince Cheng have conspired to usurp the throne. Anyone who kills either of them will be rewarded handsomely!"

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MEANWHILE, MU HANZHANG had led the left and right guardians straight to the overgrown woodland in the eastern outskirts. Ren Feng was busy training the soldiers, but when he saw the group, he immediately stepped forward in salute.

He used to spend his days recruiting martial artists at the villa, but once he had recruited enough people, Jing Shao had him enlist soldiers for his unauthorized militia. And now he was the captain of this detachment.

Mu Hanzhang displayed the tally Jing Shao had given him. "I have His Highness's tally. Assemble the troops and be ready to depart any moment!"

"At your command!" Ren Feng responded.

Naturally, he knew who the princely consort was, and he began to assemble the troops without hesitation. The horses were led out of the depths of the forest by their horsemen while the foot soldiers donned their gear. Everyone proceeded in an orderly fashion. They were almost no different from Jing Shao's vanguard battalion in terms of discipline.

The Right Guardian sang their praises. "To think he could train unregistered soldiers to this level. His Highness really is something else."

Ren Feng finished getting the soldiers ready and stepped forward. "To report to Your Lordship, all 3,723 woodland settlers are now ready for battle."

“How many cavalry?” Mu Hanzhang had someone stand on the watchtower to keep a close eye on the capital. He had not dismounted, making sure that they were ready to leave at any moment.

“One thousand cavalry, five hundred archers, the rest all foot soldiers,” Ren Feng replied.

Mu Hanzhang nodded, took the water pouch the Right Guardian handed him, and sipped from it. Then, he quietly waited for Jing Shao’s signal.

The sky gradually grew dark. As the sun set, the soldier on the watchtower suddenly called out, “Your Lordship, a red firework has just been sent up into the sky above the imperial city.”

“Move out!” Mu Hanzhang gripped the reins tightly and issued the command in a bright, clear voice. “Cavalry to the front!”

This was meant to be a last resort: They’d thought that even if Emperor Hongzheng did pass away, he would have made arrangements beforehand, so that the chances of actually needing to use this unauthorized militia were rather slim. After all, once its existence was made known, they could never use it again, and if not handled well, it would even cause them a great deal of trouble. But it seemed something must have happened in the palace which Jing Shao could not handle on his own.

Mu Hanzhang was consumed with worry, hoping that he could make it in time and that Jing Shao could hold out until he got there.

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JING SHAO STOOD IN FRONT OF his brother to shield him, and the Inkcloud Eighteen formed a circle around them both while the Imperial Guard were locked in battle with the Yulin Guard. The fourth prince had concealed his strength so well that no one knew when he’d managed to get nearly eight-tenths of the Yulin Guard on his side. The situation before them was extremely perilous, and Jing Shao had no choice but to ignite the firework he’d kept.

There were many guards in the palace, but it was true that they were no match for the Yulin Guard. The numbers of the Imperial Guard continued to dwindle, and even the Inkcloud Eighteen were growing weary from all the fighting.

“Charge!” Suddenly, more than a dozen Yulin Guards holding iron shields charged straight toward the eighteen riders, knocking aside the man at the very front. A long spear followed in a flash, pushed out from between the shields and thrusting straight for the two brothers.

With one slash of his sword Jing Shao sliced off the tip of the spear, then spun and kicked at one of the shields, knocking its bearer to the floor, and the Inkcloud Eighteen finished him off at once.

“Circle formation! Protect His Majesty!” Jing Shao projected his voice with his inner force, and the surrounding Imperial Guard immediately gathered to them.

Right now, the enemy was strong while they were weak, and even if the eighteen riders’ martial arts skills were unrivaled, they could not hold out against a whole army. His only plan was to minimize casualties as much as possible, protect his older brother, and hold out until his militia arrived to back them up.

Noticing that it was easier to approach the group with shield-wielding soldiers, the fourth prince ordered those carrying shields to the front, to force Jing Shao and the others into a corner.

The two brothers stood back-to-back, each holding a longsword, watching as the circle formed by the Imperial Guard tightened around them. Jing Shao’s white mourning attire, which he’d freshly changed into, was already stained with blood.

Now that all the guards were gathered in a circle around them, they could catch their breath for a moment. Jing Chen patted his younger brother on the shoulder. “Take a rest.”

Jing Shao wiped his face with his hand. “I’m fine.”

Having the guards form a circle was also a kind of formation—they could face enemies in every direction, leaving no gap large enough for Jing Yu to even splash water through. In this way, it didn’t matter how many Yulin Guards there were: They could cut them down layer by layer, and

they could no longer gang up on one guard at a time. Even so, the number of guards continued to dwindle.

“Charge!”

Abruptly, the sound of fighting started coming from behind the Yulin Guard as well. Jing Chen, standing at a high vantage point, was surprised to see that over a thousand cavalry had stormed in. These horsemen were dressed in nondescript gray clothes, but their horses were strong and their weapons were of good quality, and they charged into the Yulin Guard in a wedge formation.

The fourth prince was terrified. “Who are you people?!”

He’d already taken control of the imperial city, so how could there be troops charging in here? He’d made sure that the South Gate was sealed, so Jing Shao’s vanguard battalion shouldn’t have been able to get in, no matter what.

When Jing Shao spotted a tall, black warhorse among the cavalry, a smile slowly spread across his face.

***

THE MARBLE STEPS WERE stained red with fresh blood, flowing down the steps through the relief of the nine dragons carved into the marble. Jing Chen stood on the top of the steps with his hands behind his back, looking down at the Fourth Prince Jing Yu who’d been forced to kneel at the base of the steps by the Imperial Guard.

Jing Shao stood there letting his consort bandage his wounds, glaring at Jing Yu with bloodshot eyes. “Someone as devoid of conscience as this, who would murder his own father and try to kill his own brother, ought to be cut into a thousand pieces!”

Even though the minister of personnel said the case had not been fully investigated, it was clear, without a doubt, that it had been the empress consort and her people who killed his mother. And his father had also died from the same poison. It did not take much to figure out who was behind it.

Jing Yu let out a hearty laugh. Perhaps because he knew he would not live through this, the fourth prince was no longer afraid and was laughing manically. “Third Brother, you’re still as violent as ever. You’d kill your little brother today, so does that mean you’d kill your older brother tomorrow?”

Mu Hanzhang frowned; these words were clearly meant to sow discord.

Jing Chen held down Jing Shao’s sword hand and said in a deep voice, “If you cut him down now, the history books will surely condemn you when you are gone.”

“Who cares?” Jing Shao snorted. Why would he care what the history books written after he was gone had to say about him?

Jing Chen took the Sword of the Mandate out of his younger brother’s hand. “Allow us.”

Blood sprayed in an arc; the fourth prince’s eyes widened, full of bitter resentment, but he could no longer give voice to his grievances.

***

THE BATTLEFIELD was being scoured and the marble steps scrubbed. When the younger princes arrived after they were summoned, the sight of it made them all tremble in fear.

Jing Shao held his consort’s hand and walked into the Rite of Luan Palace with a strip of white silk. The disheveled empress consort sat in the main hall, quietly watching as the two approached.

Jing Shao looked coldly down at her. “Tomorrow is the grand ceremony of ascension. Has the empress resolved where she shall go?”

“The empress would of course have her own end as befitting an empress.” She stood up, adjusted her hair, and began to laugh vacantly.

Mu Hanzhang sensed the tension in the man next to him, so he quietly took his hand and said, “Because you poisoned the late emperor,

you are now a criminal of the Chen Empire and no longer deserve the title of empress. The fourth prince has already been executed. By His Majesty's decree, he is to be removed from the ancestral registry and is not permitted to be buried in the imperial mausoleum."

When the empress consort heard this, she screamed resentfully. "Such— Such ruthless hearts you have! Jing Yu is an imperial son! How could you ever cast his body into the wilderness?!"

"This Prince doesn't want to waste words on you. Hurry up and get going already. We have to get back in time for dinner." Jing Shao knew his consort was saying this to make him feel better. He reached out to wrap his arm around Mu Hanzhang's waist.

The empress consort held the white silk and began to laugh crazily. "We can at least die with dignity, unlike your mother—what an ugly way to go!"

With deliberate steps, Jing Shao walked over to her, snatched the white silk out of her hand, and with lightning speed wrapped it around her neck, tightening it slowly as he said in a voice barely above a whisper, "My brother has already issued this decree: For his treason, Earl Yongchang and his entire extended family will be executed!"

The empress consort's eyes went wide, and she reached out to scratch at him, but the white silk rapidly tightened. The sound of her vertebrae snapping was crisply audible in the hall.

Jing Shao released the strip of silk and looked down at the empress consort, who'd died in such an ugly manner, and said softly, "Even if ten of you were added together, it still wouldn't compare to the dirt beneath my mother's feet."

Mu Hanzhang slowly approached and reached out for Jing Shao, wrapped him in his arms, and gently patted his faintly trembling back.

***

IN THE SIXTEENTH YEAR of Hongzheng, the emperor passed away and the nation entered a period of mourning. The new emperor ascended the throne, adopting the reign title Shengyuan, and proclaimed a general amnesty.

On the day he ascended to the throne, Jing Chen granted the title of empress to his primary wife, Lady Xiao, and granted Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, the hereditary title of Imperial Prince Protector of the Realm.

For their crime of treason and poisoning of the late emperor, the entire Wu clan of Earl Yongchang was executed. For insurrection against the throne, Duke Mao's peerage was abolished. The first prince, Jing Rong, was demoted to common status and exiled to the land of Shu, never to return to the capital for the rest of his life.

During the second year of Shengyuan, Lady Xiao fell gravely ill.

In the imperial gardens, a young girl dressed in splendid clothing pointed and shrieked at a boy of about four. "It's all your fault. You brought death upon Xiao-Si, and now you're bringing misfortune to Mother!"

Staring at her with a pair of big black eyes, the boy did not try to argue. He simply grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it into her face.

"Ah!" The little girl immediately started to scream.

"Your Highness!" The palace maids hurriedly stepped forward to protect her.

The boy had already scrambled up a jujube tree. Whenever a palace maid approached, he would throw jujubes down from the branches, aiming right at their eyes and hitting the mark every time.

"This kid is amazing," said Jing Shao with a smile, standing behind the rockery in his moon-blue imperial prince attire. But when he turned around and saw the livid look on his brother's face, he immediately fell silent.

Jing Chen looked up at the third prince, Jing Cheng, who flaunted his higher perch, and Princess Jing Yue, kicking and screaming. His expression grew increasingly grim. "The empress wanted to raise Jing Cheng at her side, but we never thought this would be the result of her bringing him up."

“Actually, I think this kid has a genuine temperament, just like me when I was little,” said Jing Shao, walking out from behind the rockery with a smile. He leaped onto the tree in a single bound and took the boy firmly into his arms.

“Father!” When Princess Jing Yue saw Jing Chen, she immediately turned pale with fright and got on her knees to pay her respects.

“Uncle!” Jing Cheng did not seem afraid to find himself in Jing Shao’s arms. He stared wide-eyed at his imperial uncle and asked, “How did you get up here?”

“Come to the Prince Cheng Estate with me, and I’ll teach you,” said Jing Shao, patting his fluffy head.

“This child is incorrigible. You’re…” Jing Chen frowned, staring at the child under his little brother’s arm. Ever since the sudden death of his princely concubine, Lady Xiao had taken this common-born son to be brought up at her side. But though she called it “bringing up,” she rarely disciplined him and merely indulged him and let him play as he wished.

“He’s perfect!” Jing Shao said with a laugh, holding the constantly wiggling bundle in his arms.

Jing Chen frowned and sighed. “Yesterday, Marquis Beiwei petitioned for an edict to establish his grandson as his heir. You can bring Hanzhang’s brother to raise in your estate, so that in the future he can inherit the Marquis Wenyuan peerage.”

In the second year of Shengyuan, Prince Cheng adopted the emperor’s third son as his legitimate son, and at the same time, he brought Marquis Beiwei’s youngest son into the Prince Cheng and Marquis Wenyuan Estate so that the two could be educated together.

In the third year of Shengyuan, Empress Xiao passed away. King Huainan entered the capital with the founding emperor’s testament, giving Emperor Shengyuan a most severe headache.

“Brother, what exactly is written in the founder’s testament?” Jing Shao asked Gu Huaiqing, who was temporarily lodging in his estate.

He’d always wanted to know what the founder wrote in his notebook, but Jing Chen refused to let him see it, so he’d been curious for ages. If Gu

Huaiqing had the founder's testament, he figured it should be more or less the same thing.

Gu Huaiqing looked at him with something like a smile on his face. "Every generation's King Huainan is named Gu Huaiqing, and before the age of twenty-five, he is not allowed to marry a legitimate wife. Do you know why that is?"

Jing Shao stared at him blankly and shook his head.

On the Huai River, the Founder thus proclaimed: With qing[5] *guarding Huainan, We may lay Us down in peace and slumber without dread.*

This was written in the founder's testament: *The Huainan fiefdom must never be abolished; if any of Our descendants should wish to abolish the feudatory, he must first wed King Huainan and establish him as empress.*

Crash! The cup Jing Shao was holding fell to the floor and shattered into pieces. Gu Huaiqing shot him a look, then got up and went back to his room.

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WITH HIS LITTLE FACE turned up to the tree, Mu Longlin called out to the child on it. "Cheng-er, Brother says it's time for lunch."

"Uncle!" Jing Cheng jumped down from the dwarf tree and threw himself into Mu Longlin's arms. The two rotund little ones tumbled together onto the grass.

"Raahr!" A short distance away, a dozing big tiger yawned.

When he saw the two little humans rolling into a ball, he immediately perked up and bounded over jauntily, frolicking with them by nudging the kids with his great big head.

"Lin-er, Cheng-er!" cried a gentle but bright voice. Both children froze at once and stood up straight, leaving only the tiger unaware of

quickly approaching danger, jumping around at the grass that kept poking at his nose.

Mu Hanzhang took one look at the two kids and one tiger covered in grass and his face immediately fell.

“Brother…”

“Daddy…”

“Wah-oo…”

Jing Shao smiled, walking over to pull his consort into his arms. He then shot the three others a meaningful look. Jing Cheng reacted the quickest, grabbing his uncle and running off at once. Sunbeam, who had no idea what was going on, went to his master and rubbed his head against his knee, then lay down and rolled over to show his belly.

Mu Hanzhang gave the man behind him a nudge. “You’re always indulging them. Sooner or later, they’re going to turn the world upside down.”

But Jing Shao did not let go. He just smiled and held him even tighter. His past life was nothing but a memory now; sometimes, Jing Shao wondered whether everything that happened in his past life was just a dream bestowed upon him by the founder so that he would not follow in the footsteps of his ancestor, who won the empire but lost his beloved.

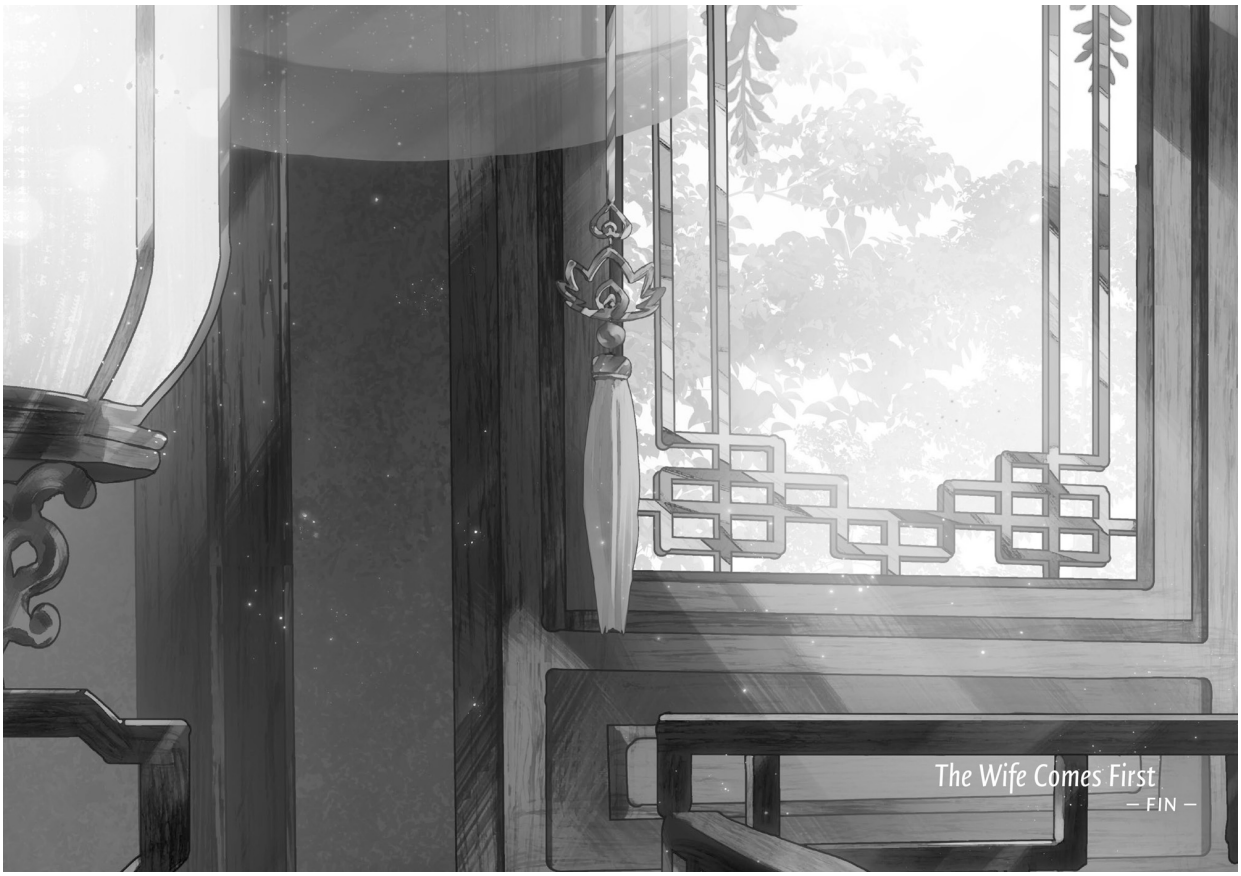
Jing Shao buried his nose in Mu Hanzhang’s nape and took a deep breath. “Junqing…”

“Hmm?” Mu Hanzhang turned back to look at him.

Jing Shao raised his head, and smiling to his eyes, he pressed a kiss on that handsome face. “It’s nothing; let’s go eat.”

Mu Hanzhang seemed to freeze for a moment, then a smile slowly emerged, curling at his lips. “Okay.”

The peach trees were blooming once more; pink petals spun quiet and soft in the spring breeze, framing the pair as they walked away together.


The Wife Comes First
— FIN —

Chapter 106:
Extra 1: Fate Clasped in Jade

THE FIRST TIME GU HUAIQING met Jing Chen, it was in a tavern in Pingjiang.

Jing Shao had written him to tell him that Prince Rui would be coming to Pingjiang to see him, so he once again had an excuse not to go home. In any case, he had a capable chancellor handling all of his administrative duties, so if he could delay his return by one more day, he would.

It was a warm day with a gentle breeze. Gu Huaiqing decided to get a drink at a tavern he often frequented, situated by the shore of the Qingshui River, only to find his favorite seat by the window already taken when he got there.

He frowned unhappily, then grabbed the waiter and tossed him a couple of pieces of silver. “Tell that guy to sit somewhere else.”

The waiter, silver in hand, hesitated. While this young gentleman was a regular, the man currently in that seat was also dressed expensively and clearly not someone he could afford to offend. He weighed the silver in his palm and found it quite substantial indeed, so he gritted his teeth, threw the towel over his shoulder, and walked over that way.

At the window, Jing Chen sat alone looking out at the Qingshui River, observing the bustling, prosperous city. His bodyguards were positioned at the next table over, not daring to disturb him. At this point, the waiter suddenly walked over.

“Sir, I’m really sorry, but I already reserved this seat for this gentleman earlier.” The waiter pointed out Gu Huaiqing, standing not far from them. “Would it be all right if I moved you to the next table?”

The bodyguards at the next table were quite annoyed and were about to get up and argue with him when Jing Chen stopped them with a look. Jing Chen turned to where the waiter pointed and saw a man in a snow-white outer robe standing not far from him. He had a beautiful face and a

graceful nobility to his person that made it clear he wasn't just any ordinary wealthy young scion.

While he was looking at Gu Huaiqing, Gu Huaiqing was also simultaneously watching him. This man was elegant and handsome, and his aura was imposing even before he began to speak. Most importantly of all, he looked a lot like Jing Shao!

Gu Huaiqing paused in surprise and quickly approached him. "Waiter, I only asked you for a seat near the window. It's fine if there isn't one. Why would you ask him to move?!"

The waiter stared wide-eyed at Gu Huaiqing in shock. But since it looked as if the latter did not intend to take back the silver, the waiter quickly went along with what he said and apologized.

"My apologies for my rudeness; I hope you'll find it in yourself to forgive me," said Gu Huaiqing, cupping his hands at Jing Chen in a salute.

Jing Chen gave him a single glance. Naturally, he knew exactly what happened, but he had no idea why this man had suddenly changed his mind. He replied insipidly, "It is quite all right."

Gu Huaiqing stared at the man in front of him. Even though he bore a striking resemblance to Jing Shao, the feeling they gave off was worlds apart. That poised, noble aura unknowingly drew other people's eyes to him, yet it also made them afraid to look directly at him. Even though Gu Huaiqing had mostly guessed the man's identity, Jing Chen had no idea who Gu Huaiqing was. When he realized this, he suddenly had a terribly amusing idea.

King Huainan was known to be wild and amorous, and he could not help teasing a beauty whenever he did meet one. With his good looks, he rarely received a cold response—Jing Shao being the exception, of course, as he only knew how to swing his fists around.

And so, planning to score a free dinner and perhaps some free drinks, Gu Huaiqing sat down across from Jing Chen and said with a smile, "Every encounter is fated, and when I see that on your belt I…"

His eyes wandered down to Jing Chen's belt, assuming he must be wearing a sword or something similar. Gu Huaiqing had a fondness for fine weaponry, so admiring it always made for good conversation. After one

look, however, he found himself suddenly at a loss for words. Jing Chen wore no weapon on his belt at all!

"What?" Jing Chen's brows furrowed; he was starting to find this man rather strange.

"Uh…the jade clasp. It is rather nice." One glare from the man across from him tied all of Gu Huaiqing's thoughts into knots. What he ended up blurting was: "Can I see it?"

Jing Chen's expression immediately clouded over.

This was the beginning of an ill-fated entanglement.

***

THE PRESENT EMPEROR SHENGYUAN was reading the founding emperor's handwritten notes, feeling an incomparable headache coming on. Though it was supposed to be the founder's notebook, it actually contained very little on how to govern a country. Most of it consisted of trivial matters that the founder jotted down on a whim, and the majority of the content concerned the Huainan fiefdom.

The founding emperor stated that he'd conquered the world with the three rebel kings by his side, but the one he was closest to was Gu Xi. The two became sworn brothers and often shared the same bed. Among its pages, the founder had used a full page of the notebook to describe Gu Xi's beauty, which made Jing Chen's mouth twitch, for who would have thought that the founding emperor, later revered as if he were a god, was once such a romantic?

The rest of the text was filled with lamentation; for the ways of the previous dynasty were not like those of today, and a man could not marry another man. When the founder established the laws of the Chen Empire, he insisted on including the right to marry another man, but no matter how hard he tried, how much he did, King Huainan ultimately did not marry him.

There was no way to know what exactly happened in between, but in the last pages of his notebook, the founder warned his descendants that they could not actively infringe upon the Huainan fiefdom. If any one of them wished to abolish it, he had to first take King Huainan as his empress, and the founder unilaterally listed a bunch of rules in regard to this marriage.

Jing Chen closed the notebook and let out a soft sigh. What the founding emperor said was to *allow* marriage between men; after so many years of refinement to the legal code as well as the unwritten rule that emerged among the people where common-born sons could only take another man as a wife, the current state of things came to be.

The reason successive emperors had failed to reclaim Huainan was firstly because even if they wanted to marry a King Huainan, a King Huainan must wish to marry them, and if the proposal went sideways, it would have led to war. Secondly, if one wished to marry King Huainan, all the officials of the Huainan fiefdom had to be incorporated into the Chen imperial court, which also posed a significant threat to imperial authority.

“To report to Your Majesty, Prince Cheng is here requesting an audience,” announced the chief eunuch.

Jing Chen rubbed at the furrow between his brows. “Let him in.”

“Greetings, Your Majesty. Long live—”

Jing Shao got down on his knees to pay his respects, but Jing Chen cut him off before he could finish. “What is it?” he said, waving a hand for him to rise. The eunuchs tactfully withdrew.

“Brother.” Jing Shao got up and sidled up to his elder brother, catching a glimpse of the yellowed little booklet in Jing Chen’s hand. “What exactly did the founding emperor write in his notebook?”

The more Jing Shao thought about it over the past two years, the more it felt like the founding emperor must have been watching from up above. In his previous life, it was right after he annihilated Huainan that he was suddenly framed by multiple people and ended up dying on Mount Fengyue. In this life, he might not have taken the war against Huainan seriously, but Emperor Hongzheng insisted on abolishing it, and the founder ended up taking Father away early instead. This all made him especially curious about what on earth the founding emperor had written in his notes.

Jing Chen put a palm over the notebook to keep him from peeking. “What are you doing here?”

Noticing the sudden change in his brother’s demeanor, Jing Shao assumed he’d said something wrong and flinched. “Oh, Gu Huaiqing is in the capital and insisted on staying at my residence.” Then he said in a perfectly serious tone, “Your brother is merely here to let you know that King Huainan has come to the capital with the founding emperor’s last testament, and he wishes to request an audience with you.”

The last testament was written by the founder’s own hand before his death and given to King Huainan as a token that would ensure his safety should it ever come to that. It was said that when the first King Huainan received it, he fell to the floor and wept, and it was not long before he followed the founder in death.

The news that King Huainan had brought the founder’s testament to the capital quickly spread throughout the city. The court was abuzz with chatter, everyone trying to speculate what the founding emperor wrote in his testament. Jing Chen had a vague idea of what it might contain, but when Gu Huaiqing read it out loud in front of the entire court, he still felt the veins in his temples throbbing endlessly.

Standing in the center of the Grand Hall, Gu Huaiqing looked up with an enigmatic smile at the handsome emperor sitting high atop his dragon throne and waited for him to say something.

It was so quiet in the Grand Hall that one could hear a pin drop—the founding emperor’s testament was simply too shocking!

“Since such a testament exists, we shall of course comply with the will of our founding emperor.” Jing Chen’s expression did not change as his inscrutable gaze met Gu Huaiqing’s. “*Qing* may simply continue to oversee Huainan. Taxes and tributes may remain as they have always been. That is all.”

A trace of disappointment crossed Gu Huaiqing’s eyes, but the emperor’s reaction was well within his expectations. He immediately got on his knees to thank his imperial grace. “This one will of course watch over Huainan for Your Majesty, to the best of his ability.”

In the third year of Shengyuan, King Huainan read the founding emperor’s testament to the assembled officials at the Chen imperial court. In the Fourth Month, he returned to Huainan’s main city, Danyang, then in the Fifth Month, he invaded Jiangzhou.

“Your Majesty, King Huainan is using the founder’s testament to do whatever he pleases in Jiangnan. And Huainan is three hundred miles of flat land away from the capital; it really is dangerous to let him be!” said the minister of war, looking quite distressed.

The minister of revenue also chimed in. “Your Majesty, several years ago, when we waged wars all over our borders, the national treasury fell into deficit. Now that things have just stabilized, this is a time when rest and recovery is urgently needed. It is inadvisable to start another war.”

Jing Chen sat behind his desk in the imperial study, his face emotionless as he listened to his major officials discuss the current situation. Seething inwardly with resentment, he glared at a certain Imperial Prince Protector of the Realm, who happened to be sitting nearby drinking tea.

Jing Shao was quietly stuffing snacks into his mouth, so he almost choked when he got glared at by his brother and quickly took a big gulp of water.

King Huainan’s so-called invasion of Jiangzhou was actually just Gu Huaiqing trying to force Jing Chen to marry him. He’d simply taken another city and sat on top of it. While the deficit in the national treasury had stemmed from Jing Shao squirreling money away during the years he was out fighting Huainan, he’d already handed it all over to Jing Chen, and even Gu Huaiqing had surrendered his share of the money. But none of this could be explained openly, so Jing Chen could only hold on to the money for now. If he were to deposit it directly into the treasury, it would be clear evidence of Jing Shao’s embezzlement. All this was why Jing Chen could do nothing but glare at his little brother a few extra times to vent his frustration.

“Now that the empress has passed away and no one is there to manage the harem, why doesn’t Your Majesty just agree to King Huainan’s proposal…?” suggested Ma Zhuo quietly.

The other senior officials exchanged looks, but none dared say anything.

Jing Chen glanced around at the room. “Is that what you all think?”

“Vice Minister Ma makes a valid point, but it is best to take some time to consider such a proposition…” came the low response from the minister of revenue.

None of the previous vassal kings of Huainan had ever wanted to marry the emperor; it was rare to find a special one who was actually willing. If the empire were to absorb the Huainan fiefdom here and now, it would be a tremendous benefit to the imperial family for generations to come. However, since His Majesty didn’t want to marry the king, they dared not speak on this further. After all, His Majesty had never taken a gentleman consort before, and ever since leaving the palace and establishing his own residence, he’d never had a man warm his bed. So, he probably didn’t like men…right?

Once the major ministers were gone, Jing Chen noticed that his brother was in a foul mood. He’d tried to grease his heels and slip away like the rest, but Jing Chen grabbed him by the collar, so he was dragged off for a game of weiqi with a face like he’d swallowed bitter melon.

The very sight of a weiqi board, filled with its black and white stone pieces, gave Jing Shao a splitting headache. He’d never had much talent for the arts or weiqi, and it was his older brother that he was playing against, to boot. His only fate was total annihilation.

A trace of pleasure welled up in Jing Chen’s troubled heart as he watched his younger brother wrinkle his nose in utter defeat. “Why don’t you ever try to learn from Hanzhang? To this day, you haven’t improved at all.”

“When Junqing plays with me, he only ever humors me and never takes the game seriously.”

Jing Shao scratched his head. Uncertain about where to put a piece down for his next move, he just placed it in a random spot. Sure enough, his brother caught it right away and took several of his pieces in a row.

Watching his little brother’s eyes light up with a smile whenever he so much as mentioned his consort, Jing Chen asked, “Li’l Shao, back when

Hanzhang hadn’t been ennobled, did you ever consider letting him go?”

“Huh?” Jing Shao seemed confused, and his hand holding the game piece paused in midair. Even though he didn’t know why his brother was suddenly bringing this up, he shook his head and answered truthfully anyway. “I never considered it.”

Jing Chen did not make the next move. Instead, his eyes were fixed on Jing Shao’s. “Marrying you meant he would be trapped within the confines of the harem forever. You didn’t think that was cruel?”

This was what his mind had been stuck on for the past little while. He had to confess that he wasn’t entirely indifferent toward Gu Huaiqing, but he did not know whether he was simply attracted to his looks or if he’d truly fallen for him. But whenever he thought of a figure of such rare beauty and charm being trapped in the inner palace and forced to scheme and compete with a bunch of women, the idea left him feeling deeply agitated.

Jing Shao heard what his brother was really trying to say, and he deftly turned the black game piece over his fingers. “I do feel bad for Junqing, but more than that, I know that I will never love anyone aside from Junqing, and I don’t see how he’d be happy just because he was away from me either. So, as long as I can be with him, I’ll always do my utmost to give him whatever he might want and make sure he never has to settle for less.”

Jing Chen quietly listened to his younger brother, neither making a move in the game before them nor saying a word.

As Jing Shao watched his brother, he couldn’t help a sigh in the end. “Brother…”

Before he came over today, his consort had repeatedly warned him not to directly advise his brother when it came to Gu Huaiqing. This was because, as the emperor, Jing Chen would definitely consider things more thoroughly than he would himself. It had always been impossible to have both empire and love; now that such an opportunity had presented itself, he had always wondered just what was giving his brother pause. So this was it…

After his younger brother left, Jing Chen sat in the imperial gardens in full bloom and watched the petals fall all around him.

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"IF EVERY KING HUAINAN is called Gu Huaiqing, did you have another name when you were little?" Staring at that man's finely sculpted face, he had asked this question on an impulse.

In his memory, Gu Huaiqing's smile was unmistakably scheming. "Give me the jade clasp and I'll tell you."

"Never mind, then." At the time, he'd found that smile dazzlingly beautiful and did not hold his rudeness against him.

"Fengxi." Gu Huaiqing reached out and snatched his jade clasp, smiling a smile that could topple empires. The heir to the Huainan fiefdom always had a name with the suffix "xi." "When I was little, I was called Fengxi."

***

IN THE FOURTH YEAR OF SHENGYUAN, in the Second Month, a full year after the late empress's passing, the court officials requested the enthronement of a new empress. In the Third Month, Emperor Shengyuan issued an edict honoring the founding emperor's testament and married Gu Huaiqing as his empress, abolishing the Huainan fiefdom. Emperor Shengyuan appreciated the chancellor of Huainan's talent and appointed him as the left chancellor to the imperial throne.

Although Gu Huaiqing was considered a second empress or an empress consort, due to the founding emperor's testament and the fact that the late empress had married Jing Chen when he was still a prince, a grand wedding was lavishly held, with a red carpet that stretched on for three miles. The whole empire rejoiced.

Jing Chen opened the door to the inner chamber of the Rite of Luan Palace, his slightly tipsy gaze turning toward the man sitting in front of the red, gauzy bed-curtains. Dressed in wedding robes similar to his own, with

the magnificent golden phoenix embroidered upon them casting a warm glow on that handsome face, Gu Huaiqing looked even more enchanting.

Jing Chen slowly approached him. He picked the wine cup off the table and handed one to Gu Huaiqing but seemed in no hurry to drink it. Instead, he simply looked at him quietly.

“Is it worth it?”

To give up everything for the sake of someone who carried the world on his back and was destined never to devote all his attention to him. Was it really worth it?

Gu Huaiqing swirled the wine in his cup, stood up, and locked one arm with the emperor’s. “This is our wedding night. Why is Your Majesty so oblivious to romance?”

Jing Chen asked no further and simply downed the wine in his cup while their arms were linked.

Jing Chen embraced his newlywed empress and lay down on the spacious bed. Through a red curtain, candlelight shone on Gu Huaiqing’s face, and in the dark, he was somehow bewitchingly seductive. Jing Chen gently caressed a lock of glossy black hair and sighed lightly.

“Why do you sigh, Your Majesty?” Gu Huaiqing extended a slender finger and tapped it against his own lips. “Tender spring nights are all too short—Your Majesty, please don’t waste such precious time.”

Jing Chen slowly untied the sash embroidered in phoenix patterns, revealing a toned chest with well-defined muscles. He pressed a kiss against his skin. “As you consented to wed Us, We shall never betray your trust.”

Gu Huaiqing’s willowy eyes curled as he smiled, and he quietly waited for his husband to strip him of all of his clothes. Then he turned over to pin the emperor beneath him. “Your Majesty, please take a break. This one will take good care of you.”

“We can’t do that.” Jing Chen’s brows drew together; he felt that there was something inappropriate about this situation, somehow. He turned them back over, pinning Gu Huaiqing beneath him. “How is it in any way proper to have Our empress on top of Us?”

“Beg Your Majesty’s pardon,” said Gu Huaiqing, without the merest hint of sincerity. In one forceful motion, he pinned the other man beneath him again. “This one has been thinking of Your Majesty both day and night, and such slow torment is simply unbearable, so…” As he was saying this, he was already slipping a hand into the imperial robes.

***

MORNING COURT WAS SUSPENDED for three days in light of His Majesty’s nuptials. To everyone’s astonishment, His Majesty didn’t even set foot outside the Rite of Luan Palace during those three days. The palace staff was all abuzz. Everyone was saying how this empress seemed especially favored; even when His Majesty married the second imperial consort years ago, no one had ever seen him so fond of her.

A year passed. Mu Hanzhang was at the imperial study to deliver the memorials he’d processed for His Majesty, while Jing Shao, who had nothing to do, came along to the palace with his consort for a fun visit.

Jing Shao looked around the room. “Where’s my imperial brother-in-law?” Hadn’t his brother said that he could ask Gu Huaiqing to help him review memorials?

“The empress is feeling a little tired, so We have told him to remain in the Rite of Luan Palace to get some rest.” Jing Chen looked through several memorials with a blank expression. Finding nothing wrong with the ones Mu Hanzhang had reviewed, he set those aside and started on the new ones.

Jing Shao understood right away, and exchanging a knowing look with Jing Chen, he took his consort’s hand and led him away.

Once everyone was gone, Empress Gu emerged from behind the screen, dressed in imperial phoenix robes. He got up close to His Majesty with a fawning smile and said, “You must be tired from sitting. Why don’t you lean against me?”

Jing Chen turned a deaf ear and continued to review his memorials, so His Majesty Empress Gu took the initiative and got up close to massage his lower back for him.

Jing Chen huffed derisively. “If you keep this up, I’ll banish you to the disfavored concubines’ palace tomorrow and lock you away.” But beneath his notice, his body had subconsciously started to lean lightly against the man beside him.

“How could you be so heartless, Your Majesty?” Gu Huaiqing’s brows drew together, and he put his head on Jing Chen’s shoulder. “Now that I am with child, I fear the baby will never make it if I’m sent to such a cold and desolate place.”

Jing Chen rubbed at his throbbing temples in exasperation and squeezed his words out through gritted teeth. “To speak such nonsense as the empress of a nation—what a disgrace!”

“To think Your Majesty would suspect this one of lying!” The look on Gu Huaiqing’s face grew ever more plaintive. “I must now prove my innocence to Your Majesty.” Saying this, he reached his hand under His Majesty’s lapel.

“…Get lost!”

Chapter 107:
Extra 2: Sunbeam's Daily Life

EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT shone over the flowerbeds, casting dappled spots of light on a swath of black-and-yellow fur. A door creaked as it opened, disturbing a dream filled with braised pork. Sunbeam hugged his head in protest, attempting to continue the pleasant dream he was having, but alas, some people just had no clue.

Jing Shao nudged the furball in the flower bushes with his toe. "Stupid tiger, the sun is shining on your butt!"

Sunbeam shot a look at this stretching guy and bared his teeth at him in protest. That was the human his owner kept, but he was not too smart, so he could never remember his name. He would call out random names like "Furball," "Furry Tiger," "Stupid Tiger," and so on, but as a magnanimous tiger, Sunbeam deigned not to argue with him. He shook his head and dashed inside.

On the soft big bed lay Sunbeam's human. A fair arm was draped over the side of the bed, looking quite appetizing. The furry tiger moved closer to it, stuck out his tongue, and gave it a lick.

Mu Hanzhang felt a prickling on his palm and opened his eyes to be greeted by a furry big face staring at him with a pair of bright eyes. He couldn't help smiling and patting that furry head before he turned over to continue sleeping.

Sunbeam tilted his head and watched him for a while before reaching out with a paw to catch a lock of black hair. Even though his master did not have beautiful fur, his hair was even prettier than a horse's tail, making up for the lack of fur quite well. Sunbeam was rather fond of this smooth fur. He put both paws around the hair, then he twirled and scratched and twirled and scratched some more until the silky long hair turned into a tangled mess, even picking up some dirt from its paws. The tiger licked at it unhappily, cleaning off the dirt.

"Dumb thing, you're putting spit on it again!"

Jing Shao set down the breakfast he was carrying, grabbed the tiger by the scruff of the neck to drag him outside, then asked the servants to leave him in the zoo in the west wing.

The west wing of the Prince Cheng and Marquis Wenyuan Estate, which used to house the womenfolk, had been demolished. Grass had been planted in its place just as Jing Shao wanted. As ferocious beasts could not be kept in the palace, the empress had given his lion to Prince Cheng to keep, and the west wing had become the lion's dwelling.

Sunbeam was a regular here. As soon as he came in, he quickly found the still-sleeping lion.

The little lion was already full-grown; his long brown mane ringed his neck, making him look rather majestic. Sunbeam had always felt sorry for him; after all, the fur on his body was so short, and he had no stripes either. He figured that only a kindhearted tiger like himself would befriend him.

The lion opened his eyes as soon as he caught the tiger's scent, but he simply lay lazily without moving and waited for the furry tiger to come over on his own. Sunbeam padded over majestically with his head held high and lay down next to the lion, accepting this underling's audience of homage by letting him groom his fur. While there, he gnawed on the lion's head a bit.

The lion yawned, tilting his head to lick the tiger's furry head. Then he put his great big head onto the tiger's front paws, closed his eyes, and continued to sleep.

Sunbeam was very much dissatisfied with his underling's laziness and opened his mouth to bite his ear, nipping the top of his head a few times. The lion flicked his tail dismissively and continued monopolizing the tiger's soft front paws. Tired from gnawing, Sunbeam decided to put his head on the lion's belly for a nap.

After noon, when he'd eaten the tribute of prey from his lion underling, he lay back on his back and reached out with his paws to catch the tuft of fur at the end of the lion's tail. The lion would swish his tail back and forth for him to catch. When the tiger managed to grab it, the lion would let him hold on to it and nibble on it for a while. Then, just as

Sunbeam was about to bite down hard, the lion would pull his tail away and go back to swishing it back and forth.

“Sunbeam!” After the hour of High Noon, Ge Ruoyi came to take the tiger away for a bath. The lion was raised feral and could clean itself, but Sunbeam was overly pampered and insisted on being cared for.

Ge Ruoyi took the furry tiger to the pond in the gardens for a thorough wash. Sunbeam was fairly satisfied with this maid, for she at least never got water up his nose and even used a soft brush to clean his paw pads. When she finished, he lifted his wet paw and rewarded her a handsome paw print.

Ge Ruoyi looked down at the wet stain on her pale-yellow skirt and fumed. “Sunbeam!”

Sunbeam shook himself and sprayed the water clinging to him all over Ge Ruoyi, letting her know she didn’t have to get too emotional about all he’d done for her, then he strolled off to his afternoon napping spot for a rest.

When Shadow saw the wet and furry fat tiger coming over to steal a spot once more, he snorted at him disdainfully.

Sunbeam shook his now-dried head and bestowed a paw print upon Li’l Shadow, which just happened to land right on that glossy black rump. This was the most beautiful horse Sunbeam had ever seen. Every part of his body was absolutely perfect and surely must be delicious to eat. But Sunbeam knew that this horse was off-limits, so he could only hug that horse’s powerful leg and drool, hoping that he could get a lovely dream of eating horse meat.

“Uncle, come quickly!”

A bright voice rang out nearby, then a child dressed in fine brocade pulled another child just a little bit smaller than himself into the stables.

“Cheng-er, if Brother sees us, we’ll get our palms slapped,” said a soft and sweet voice that belonged to Mu Longlin.

“That’s okay. Father just went inside the room.” Jing Cheng lifted his little chin and said confidently, “Daddy is definitely going to sleep for a long time again.”

“How come?” Mu Longlin tilted his little head, not understanding what his brother-in-law going inside the room had to do with his brother going to sleep.

“They two of them are going to play ride-the-horsie,” said Jing Cheng seriously. “And Daddy always gets very tired after playing it.”

“Ride-the-horsie?” Mu Longlin blinked, his eyes lighting up. “Cheng-er, let’s play ride-the-horsie too.”

“What’s so special about horse-riding? Let’s go ride a tiger,” said Jing Cheng as he hauled the tiger out of the haystack.

Sunbeam was rather displeased at being woken from his nap and gave Jing Cheng a low growl. He got up and shook his head, then left the stables, finding a spot of shade in the garden to lie in.

Two kids holding hands hurried over on their short little legs and, after a bit of looking around, found the furball lying in the shade. Jing Cheng let go of his uncle’s hand, bounced over ecstatically, and threw himself onto Sunbeam’s back.

Sunbeam turned and bared his teeth at him, then flipped over to throw him off. Jing Cheng fell onto the grass, and Mu Longlin quickly walked over to help him up. “Cheng-er, are you hurt?”

“It doesn’t hurt!” Jing Cheng got up and tried to climb onto the tiger again.

“Aiyoh, you two little troublemakers—what are you doing playing with a tiger?!”

The wet nurse who’d come looking for the two kids broke out in a cold sweat at the sight and hurried over to lift the little prince off the tiger.

Jing Cheng kicked with his two stubby legs. “Put me down!”

The wet nurse couldn’t control him, so she used her trump card. “His Lordship is awake.”

Sure enough, as soon as the little tyrant heard that, he immediately stopped moving. “Where is Daddy?”

The wet nurse breathed a sigh of relief. “His Lordship just got up—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Jing Cheng grabbed Mu Longlin's hand and dashed off, saying: "Uncle, hurry up; Daddy will be heading to our study soon."

"Okay," Mu Longlin responded, letting himself be pulled along by his nephew as they ran away clumsily together.

The world was finally quiet. Sunbeam yawned, took two bites of the green foxtail grass by his mouth, and went back to sleep on his back, belly-up.

He slept for an entire afternoon. Once the moon rose high into the sky, Sunbeam was awakened by the night's chill. He got up and looked around and noticed that the light was still on in his master's house. He sniffed at the air and found it rather humid; there would likely be rain in the night. Sunbeam hated damp weather like this, so he started toward the house. Naturally, his master's big soft bed was the most comfortable place to sleep in on a rainy day.

"Mm, don't…"

The curtains around the bed were tightly drawn, so Sunbeam couldn't see what was happening inside and could only hear his master's voice, which sounded as if he were in pain. "Ah, we just did it at noon… You bastard…"

Sunbeam padded quickly to the bed and pulled the curtain aside to find that eyesore of a guy lying on top of his master, biting his master's neck. Was he going to eat his master? Sunbeam was instantly enraged. He bolted onto the bed, grabbed Jing Shao's collar, and pulled hard, yanking him off the bed.

Jing Shao had just finished preparing Mu Hanzhang, and with his temple all covered in sweat, he was about to align his cock and enter him. Suddenly, he was pulled back by a great force and fell onto the footrest with a thud.

"Stupid tiger!"

Prince Cheng's furious roar echoed throughout the east wing. Then, the confused tiger was immediately thrown out of the room, and his master, whom he'd bravely saved, did nothing to help and simply looked on as he was shut outside with a slam of the door.

Sunbeam scratched bitterly at the door, and his master's voice came from inside the house in intermittent bursts that sounded rather strange to his ears. He listened for a while, but not only did his master's voice not weaken, it actually seemed to be getting louder and louder. That meant the man had not eaten his master. Perhaps they were having a fight?

Kaboom! Thunder roared in the distance, and it wasn't long before it started to rain heavily. Sunbeam lay under the awning of the covered corridor and watched as the rain drenched the flowers in the garden, listening to the noises coming out of the room that still hadn't stopped. Ever since he had gotten taller than his master, he had never held him to sleep again. And even on a stormy night like this, he was no longer worried that he might be frightened by the thunder.

Sunbeam scratched at a red column, but the sound was drowned out by the patter of the rain. No one noticed him, so he could only lie down quietly to watch each raindrop plop into the puddle, making bubbles.

The life of a tiger that could not sleep on a bed was truly as lonely as snow. *Reow-rah…*

Chapter 108:
Extra 3: A Fleeting Dream

THE DARK, DANK CELL never saw daylight, and no matter how high they stacked the hay, they could not keep the cold from the bluestone slabs below which radiated chill in waves that froze one to the bone.

A rat scurried around in the hay. When its head suddenly brushed against a hand, it opened its pointed mouth and bit down. Jing Shao hissed as the bite woke him and instinctively turned his hand over to grab the culprit.

“Squeak!” The rat shrieked in fright.

Nearby, Mu Hanzhang was startled awake by the noise. When he saw Jing Shao facing off against a rat, he couldn’t help laughing. He slowly sat up and said, “Your Highness, why aren’t you sleeping?”

Jing Shao turned to him. Torches had been lit in the prison’s corridor, their flames crackling in the night. Dim light illuminated the man sitting in the corner of the room, somehow making it seem warm. Jing Shao was compelled to shuffle closer to him.

He showed him the rat. “I caught this. We can have some meat now.”

Mu Hanzhang frowned, looking down at the furry gray rat squirming frantically in his hand, unable to imagine how they were supposed to eat such a thing. He decided not to pursue this topic further.

“If Your Highness cannot sleep, why not chat with this one for a while,” he began, but whatever he was going to say was interrupted by coughing.

His health had always been poor, and now that he was locked away in the prison without any medicine, the cold stone floor often triggered cramps in his legs. Even now, his legs still twitched with waves of pain.

Seeing him cough again, Jing Shao went over. He tied the rat’s tail to a nail on the wall, then leaned up against him. “Um…if you’re cold, you can lean against me.”

Even though he was seldom at home, he knew that his princely consort was in poor health. He was the rightful consort, so Jing Shao couldn't treat him too badly, and there'd always been ample medicine for him. However, even after all these years, he didn't seem to be getting any better.

Mu Hanzhang shook his head and stared at Jing Shao's once-handsome face. It had since lost its former radiance, his chin covered in stubble and his beautiful eyes dull and lifeless. Since they'd been locked up together like this, Mu Hanzhang had seen him go from his initial madness to eventual resignation to remorse after seeing Jing Chen. And now, he was in the depths of utter despair. Strangely, much of the resentment that had accumulated inside him over the years had dissolved. After all, Jing Shao was also an unfortunate soul.

Mu Hanzhang raised a hand and pointed to a spot on the roof. "Your Highness, look at that."

This cell was entirely constructed out of stone, including the ceiling. Jing Shao looked in the direction he was pointing and saw a sliver of moonlight coming through a crack in the stone at the very top of the cell. Though it was hard to see in the torchlight, from Mu Hanzhang's position, one could clearly see a little slice of starry night sky.

Jing Shao stared at it in pleasant surprise. In order to see it better, he kept moving toward Mu Hanzhang until he was pressed right up against him.

A deep sapphire-blue sky showed through that tiny sliver of a gap, seeming to contain limitless beauty. Jing Shao stared at it, drinking in the sight so greedily that he could barely stand to blink.

"That's such a beautiful night sky. It's as good as what I saw in the desert."

The figure pressed against Mu Hanzhang was very warm, easing the aches in his body, so he didn't try to move away.

"What's it like in the desert?" he asked as he leaned against the bluestone wall, staring at that spot.

"The desert is vast and endless, and you can walk for a hundred miles without encountering a soul." Despite himself, Jing Shao found a smile

tugging at his lips as he recalled his younger days. “Back then, I was hunting down the leader of the Xiongnu and led three thousand light cavalry in an overnight pursuit. All you could hear across the entire desert was the sound of hoofbeats…”

Mu Hanzhang gazed into his bright eyes that seemed almost to shine. “Your Highness must have been fearless back then.”

“Yeah, I was so young that I didn’t even know what fear was. I only knew how to charge ahead! Even though I only had three thousand cavalry, I had no fear knowing I was up against thirty thousand Xiongnu…”

Jing Shao’s words came to a halt then, and he quietly looked over at Mu Hanzhang. “Were you about to say something?”

Mu Hanzhang looked up at that little patch of night sky. “Your Highness feared nothing as a child. And now, you no longer have anything left to lose, so what’s there to be afraid of?”

Jing Shao froze for a moment and seriously regarded this consort of his for the first time. Even though he’d been locked up for a long time and looked somewhat disheveled, his shabby appearance could not conceal the proud integrity inherent to a scholar. Like a supple branch of green bamboo, he was somehow even stronger than Jing Shao, a man who rode fearlessly into battle.

Mu Hanzhang descended into a series of coughs before he got an answer from Jing Shao. The chill had entered his lungs, and he coughed so hard that his entire body trembled. Watching that frail body curling against the cold stone wall, Jing Shao suddenly felt a pang of sympathy.

Impulsively, he reached out and pulled the man who could not stop coughing into his arms. “Let me warm you up.”

The body in his embrace was so slender and frail that he felt almost bony. The hand pressed against his lips was so thin that it was practically skin and bones, his blue veins winding beneath pale skin almost unsightly.

Jing Shao couldn’t help a frown. “How did you ever get so thin?”

Before Mu Hanzhang could reply, they suddenly heard a faint, rustling noise coming in the hallway, likely a jailer walking around with keys. It was the middle of the night, so jailers wouldn’t wander around with

keys if it wasn’t something urgent. Jing Shao immediately pulled the man in his arms down into the haystack with him and buried his face in Mu Hanzhang’s long hair so he could observe what was happening outside the door.

Behind the jailer with a torch were two men in black, who came to a stop as they reached Mu Hanzhang and Jing Shao’s cell. When they noticed that the two men inside were still asleep, they exchanged a look.

The jailer knocked on the iron bars and said sarcastically, “Your Highness, the Ministry of Justice has sent over a couple of officers, and they want to ask you some questions.”

Mu Hanzhang whispered quietly in his embrace: “Members of the imperial family cannot be interrogated in the middle of the night, Your Highness. Be careful.”

Jing Shao frowned and sat up but did not let go of Mu Hanzhang. He said coldly, “You cur, This Prince wishes to sleep some more. If you have something to say, leave it for tomorrow!”

“That is not up to Your Highness,” said the jailer as he opened the cell door and let the two people inside. “Since Your Highness keeps refusing to confess, why don’t we question your princely consort today?”

The black-clad men had a firm, measured gait and were clearly proficient in the martial arts. Jing Shao instinctively sensed danger and quickly stood up, shielding Mu Hanzhang behind him.

“Whether you want to interrogate This Prince or the princely consort, you’ll need a handwritten edict from my father.”

The jailer smiled ominously and said nothing more. Once the two men in black had stepped into the cell, he quickly left the room and locked the door with a few turns of his key before hurrying away.

Without a word, the two men drew daggers from their sleeves and charged at him. Jing Shao’s pupils rapidly contracted, and in a flash, he kicked one away before dropping to a crouch to dodge an oncoming blade. It was two against one, and because he had no weapon, he was struggling to hold his own. Mu Hanzhang shrank into the corner to avoid making things harder for Jing Shao.

Jing Shao snatched one of the daggers, spun around, and threw the man against the iron door with a kick. He turned his hand around to stab at the man's chest but suddenly felt a chill coming from behind him. It was likely the chill of a weapon slicing through the air, making him turn back around.

But when he did, he caught a warm body in his arms.

"Hanzhang!" Jing Shao's eyes grew wide and red as he watched that dagger strike Mu Hanzhang's body. Blood gushed forth. He'd already lost everything, and Mu Hanzhang was now all that he had. But that, too, was about to be taken away. How could they?! How could they?!

"Argh!" Jing Shao let out a furious roar and kicked that man into the corner. He leaped into the air and drove the dagger hard into the chest of the man in black. But that was not enough. He stabbed him again and again until everything around him was stained crimson.

"Hanzhang, Hanzhang, why would you save me…"

Jing Shao held the man, whose face had gone pale with pain, close to his chest. This man had taken a dagger for him, yet how could such an irresponsible husband like him be worthy of this sacrifice? He turned and howled at the door. "Help! Help!"

"No… No!" Jing Shao abruptly bolted up, gasping over and over for breath.

"What's wrong?" Mu Hanzhang groggily sat up, having been startled awake. When he saw the look on Jing Shao's face, he became fully awake at once and reached out to steady him. "Li'l Spoon, what's the matter?"

Jing Shao stared blankly in front of him for a long moment. Then he slowly turned to fix his gaze on the man before him. His skin was smooth and lustrous, glowing with a healthy flush from sleep. Behind him was the bed-curtain in warm tones, and beneath them, a soft bed.

"Li'l Spoon…" Noticing that he didn't look right, Mu Hanzhang reached out and wrapped Jing Shao in his arms, gently patting him on the back. "Did you have a nightmare?"

It was only when Mu Hanzhang's warm body pressed up against him that Jing Shao was finally dragged out of the nightmare. He slowly reached

out and embraced his consort, gradually tightening his hold, wanting to hold him so close that it would make him part of the marrow in his bones.

Realizing that Jing Shao was covered in cold sweat, Mu Hanzhang found his heart aching for him. He brushed a hand down his back and asked, “What did you dream about?”

With how fearless Jing Shao was, what on earth could have frightened him so?

Jing Shao remained silent and refused to say anything. He simply buried his face in the warm nook of Mu Hanzhang’s neck, greedily inhaling his dry, warm scent.

With no answer forthcoming, Mu Hanzhang refused to let go of him as well and smiled a grudging smile. They’d been married for almost ten years now, yet this guy was still like a kid. So, he let his voice go soft and said, “I also had a strange dream earlier. I dreamed that the two of us were in a prison cell, and you caught a rat…”

“Junqing!” Jing Shao jerked the man in his arms back away from him and stared at him with wide eyes. Without waiting for a response, he pushed Mu Hanzhang onto the bed and caught his lips in a bruising kiss.

It was almost frantic, panicked; his grip tightened, and with a rip, he tore the snow-white silk of Mu Hanzhang’s underrobe open. He needed to do something to confirm that they were both alive, to confirm that no one had taken away any of this warmth.

Mu Hanzhang grunted, for his kiss hurt a little. He frowned and tried to push Jing Shao away, only to be held even tighter.

Time had not left its mark on Mu Hanzhang. He was almost thirty but still looked as if he had just turned twenty; his skin was radiant and smooth as though polished. Every inch of him made Jing Shao want to cling to him at all times.

But there was no time to worship this body at the moment. Jing Shao was eager to become one with him to soothe the panic he felt. He scooped a big dollop of fragrant balm onto his finger and pushed it all into Mu Hanzhang. Then he rubbed some of it on his own cock and, with one hand holding fast that slender waist, pushed inside him forcefully.

“Ah…it hurts…” With the tightest part of his body suddenly stretched as far as it could go, Mu Hanzhang threw his head back and shook it in pain.

Jing Shao wrapped his arms around Mu Hanzhang and sat him in his lap. Mu Hanzhang grunted. In this position, the great big thing inside of him thrust into him so deep it was unbelievable, and it hurt so much that he could barely stand it. He bit down hard on Jing Shao’s shoulder.

Jing Shao let out a muffled groan, holding the man in his arms even tighter. Only now did the panic in his heart begin to ease, and he slowly let out a breath. He did not make another rash move and gently brushed his lips over the corner of one teary eye, slowly stroking that smooth back so Mu Hanzhang would gradually relax.

Mu Hanzhang breathed slowly, the pain in his body beginning to ease. “Are you… Are you out of your mind…”

“Sorry…” Jing Shao murmured, once again taking Mu Hanzhang’s lips into his own, kissing him gently. His kisses trailed along Mu Hanzhang’s chin, over his collarbone and his shoulder, until he found a pink nipple to take between his lips, and there he softly licked and massaged with his tongue.

His lips pressed together, Mu Hanzhang moaned, his breathing quickening as the pain below subsided. What followed was an unbearable scorching heat and an internal tingling that wanted more. He couldn’t help shifting a little.

Jing Shao looked up at him. “It doesn’t hurt anymore?” He waited to receive a slight nod before he put his hands on that supple ass. Holding onto his partner, he began to move with an easy rhythm.

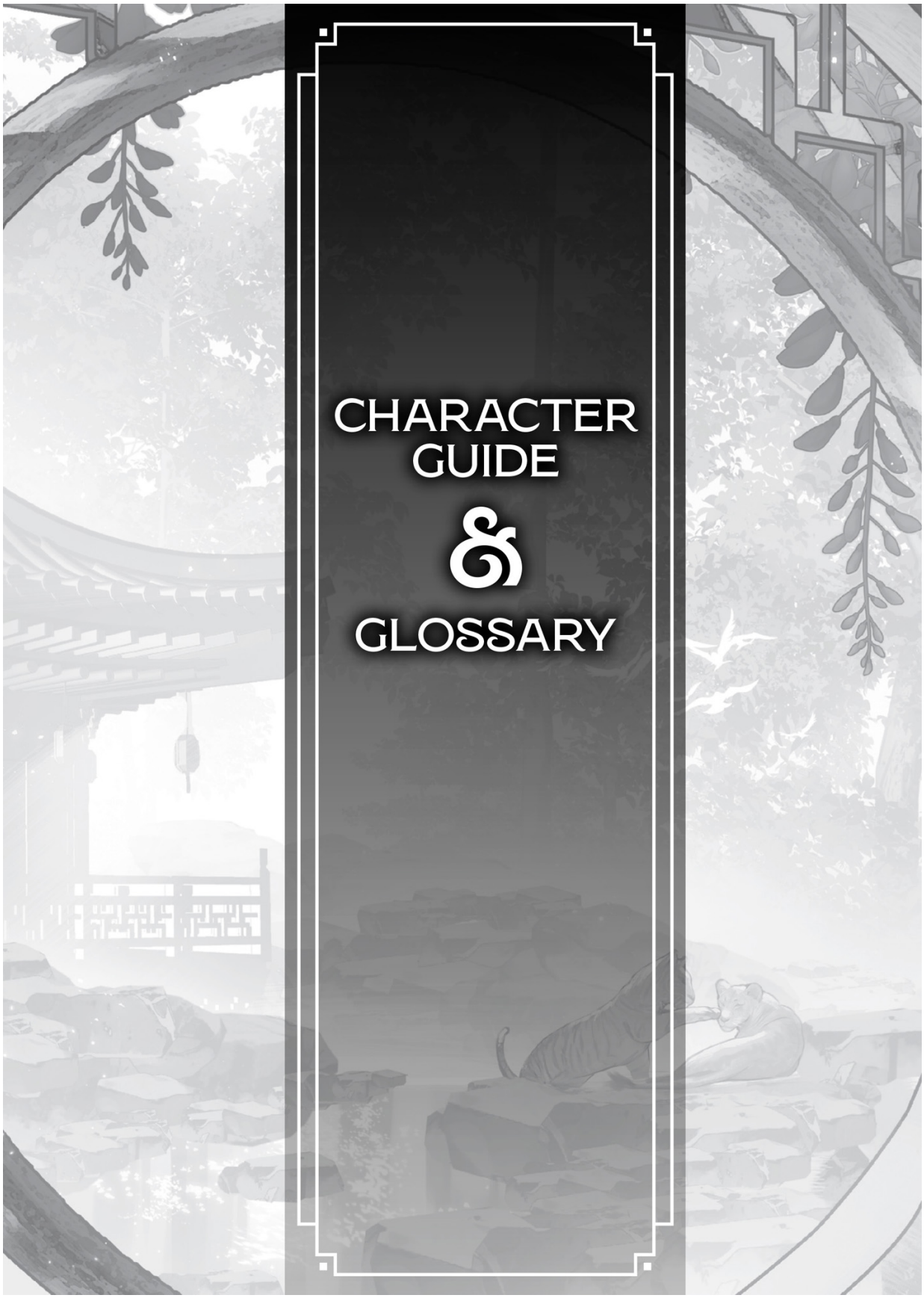
The dream he’d had earlier had felt too real, and the pain of being on the cusp of losing everything nearly overwhelmed him. Jing Shao couldn’t help seeking reassurance over and over again, confirming time and again that what was before his eyes wasn’t a dream, that both he and Junqing were indeed alive and well, that he had been taking good care of Junqing, and they were having their happily ever after…

The warmth wrapped around him dispelled the chill in his dream, and sweet moans soothed his restless soul. He did not know how much time had

gone by before this frantic lovemaking finally came to a halt. Jing Shao wrapped his arms tightly around the man who'd fallen into deep sleep, gently planting a kiss on the reddened corner of his eye.

The past had already become a fleeting dream; lamentation served no purpose.

How many chances to begin again would this world ever offer? Do not wait until that treasured one has been lost before realizing that wealth and glory are but mere illusions, leaving only regrets…


CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JING SHAO 景韶: The third prince, granted the title of Prince Cheng at nineteen before any of his brothers for expelling the Xiongnu. Son of the former empress and Emperor Hongzheng.

MU HANZHANG 慕含章: Married to Jing Shao as Princely Consort Cheng. Courtesy name Junqing 君清. Common-born son of Marquis Beiwei. A provincial graduate at seventeen, known as the Erudite Gentleman among many young scholars in the capital.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

CONCUBINE QIU 邱姨娘: Mu Hanzhang's mother.

DUCHESS MAO 茂国公夫人: Jing Yu's future mother-in-law.

DUKE MAO 茂国公: The fourth prince's future father-in-law.

DUOFU 多福: A eunuch. Chief steward to Jing Shao's estate.

EARL SHOUCHANG 寿昌伯: An earl in the former administration who had his peerage abolished for asking to make his common-born son his heir.

EARL YONGCHANG 永昌伯: The empress consort's brother.

EMPEROR HONGZHENG 宏正帝: Emperor of the Chen Empire; a common-born son of a concubine.

EMPRESS CONSORT / LADY WU 吴氏: Elevated to empress consort after the late empress's death. Sister to Earl Yongchang.

GE RUOYI 葛若衣: A young woman from Dongnan seeking revenge against King Dongnan for her brother's death.

GU HUAIQING 顧淮卿 / KING HUAINAN 淮南王: Vassal king of the Huainan Fiefdom.

GU XI 顾夕: The first King Huainan, Gu Huaiqing's ancestor, who campaigned with the founding emperor of Chen.

HAO DADAO 郝大刀: The descendant of a great general from the former dynasty, who ended up a butcher in the village of Shanxia. Now one of Jing Shao's subordinates.

JIANG LANG 姜朗: Imperial Physician Jiang's son, now one of Jing Shao's guards as part of his elite troops.

JING CHEN 景琛: The second prince, Jing Shao's same-blood brother.

JING CHENG 景澄: Jing Chen's common-born son from his princely concubine, raised by Lady Xiao.

JING RONG 景荣: First prince, common-born son of Emperor Hongzheng and a palace maid.

JING YI 景逸: Seventh prince, still a child.

JING YU 景瑜: Fourth prince, legitimate son of the empress consort and Emperor Hongzheng.

JING YUE 景岧: Jing Chen's daughter.

KING DONGNAN 東南王: Vassal king of the Dongnan Fiefdom. Ge Ruoyi has a vendetta against him for murdering her entire family.

KING XINAN 西南王: Vassal king of the Xinan Fiefdom.

LEFT GUARDIAN 左护军: A protector general for Jing Shao's army. Stone-faced and speaks little.

LU ZHANPENG 陸展鹏: Jing Shao's childhood study companion and friend. The regional commander of Jiangnan. Nicknamed Brined Bird by Jing Shao due to a misreading of his name.

MA ZHUO 马卓: The Tertius Flower of this year's imperial exams. Actually Zhuo Yunji 卓云驭, Jing Chen's study companion when he was a child. His entire family was disgraced and exiled, and now he has returned to the capital under an assumed name.

MARQUIS BEIWEI 北威侯 / MU JIN 慕晋: Mu Hanzhang's father.

MARQUIS DINGNAN 定南侯: Jing Chen's father-in-law.

MASTER YUN 云先生: Steward to the outer court of the Prince Cheng Estate.

MENGXI 梦兮: One of Jing Shao's handmaidens.

MIAOXI 妙兮: One of Jing Shao's handmaidens.

MINISTER SUN 孙尚书: Minister of war.

MU HUAFENG 慕华锋: Another cousin to Mu Hanzhang.

MU LINGBAO 慕灵宝: Heir to the Marquise Beiwei peerage, legitimate-born.

MU LONGLIN 慕龙鳞: Mu Hanzhang's baby brother, Mu Jin's youngest son. Courtesy name Lingmo 灵陌.

MU YANGWEN 慕扬文: A cousin to Mu Hanzhang.

QIN ZHAORAN 秦昭然: The Primus Scholar of this year's imperial exams. Mu Hanzhang's childhood classmate and a distant relative.

RIGHT GUARDIAN 右护军: A protector general for Jing Shao's army. Smiles a lot, talkative.

SONG AN 宋安: Vice minister of war, Song Lingxin's father.

SONG LINGXIN 宋凌心 / MADAM SONG 宋氏: Jing Shao's secondary wife, daughter of Song An.

WANG ER 王二: A soldier in Jing Shao's army in the logistics camp.

XIAO QIAN 萧潜: Captain of the palace guard.

XIAO YUAN 萧远: Formerly vice minister of revenue. Courtesy name Heng Zhi 恆之. Distantly related to the House of Dingnan. Now promoted to vice minister of personnel.

YUN SONG 云松: Jing Shao's pageboy.

YUN ZHU 云竹: Mu Hanzhang's pageboy.

ZHAO JIULIN 赵久林: Vice minister of rites. An ally of the fourth prince, Jing Yu.

ZHAO MENG 趙孟: A general of Jing Shao's army, a bearded brute of a soldier.

ZHIXI 芷兮: Senior handmaiden of Jing Shao.

ZHOU JIN 周谨: Xiao Yuan's wife, proprietor of The Flavor of Nostalgia.

NAMES, HONORIFICS AND TITLES

Courtesy Names and Given Names

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

Terms of Endearment

-ER: A suffix that literally means "son," but in practical usage, it is similar to the English suffix "-ie," much like turning "fish" into "fishie."

GLOSSARY

Measurements and Time

All measurements have been converted to standard imperial measurements, with the exception of the “tael,” which is only used for precious metals, and at sixteen grams per tael, it weighs a little more than half of an ounce. A lot of these are approximations; for example, the Ming dynasty’s 一斗 (one dou) is about 10L or 2.64 gallons.

The traditional Chinese day was divided into twelve dual-hours, with each hour named after the twelve Earthly Branches. During the Han Dynasty, more meaningful names were given to each dual-hour. There is some overlap with the late evening hours and night watches. When a time of day that denotes a specific dual-hour is given, proper case is used. When a dual-hour passes, the text is localized as two hours.

一更 FIRST WATCH: 19:00 – 21:00

二更 SECOND WATCH: 21:00 – 23:00

三更 THIRD WATCH: 23:00 – 01:00

四更 FOURTH WATCH: 01:00 – 03:00

五更 FIFTH WATCH: 03:00 – 05:00

子时 MIDNIGHT: 23:00 – 01:00

丑时 COCKCROW: 01:00 – 03:00

寅时 DAYBREAK: 05:00 – 05:00

卯时 SUNRISE: 05:00 – 07:00

辰时 BREAKFAST: 07:00 – 09:00

巳时 MIDMORNING: 09:00 – 11:00

午时 HIGH NOON: 11:00 – 13:00

日昳 AFTERNOON: 13:00 – 15:00

申时 WANING SUN: 15:00 – 17:00

酉时 DUSK: 17:00 – 19:00

戌时 NIGHTFALL: 19:00 – 21:00

亥时 DEAD OF NIGHT: 21:00 – 23:00

BOW, CURTSY, KOWTOW: A bow is at the waist, and how deeply the bow goes denotes the level of respect. Curtsies are done by women only, and a Chinese curtsy is done by forming both hands into orchids (thumb touching middle finger), placing both hands by the left hip, bending both knees slightly, and tipping the head. A kowtow is prostration, and involves kneeling, palms facing downward with fingers pointed at opposing hands in front of knees, then bending down until forehead touches the back of fingers. A half kowtow simply means the person bends down only halfway to the hands.

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS:

Four Books: *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*

Five Classics: *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

These books form the core of Confucianism and are what students used to be tested on in the Imperial Examination system.

HORSE PLAGUE: The ancient Chinese way of dealing with contagious diseases is to collect bodies and burn them to prevent further spread of contagion. “Horse plague” was very likely anthrax, and at other times, equine influenza.

IMPERIAL EXAMS: Placements within the civil service are gained through participation in the exams system. Graduates at and above the provincial level are often given a modest stipend, a kind of fixed income, so

that they can continue studying and perhaps participate in higher level exams, even if they don't hold an official position; Provincial Graduates can participate in the Metropolitan Exams, and Metropolitan Graduates can participate in the Palace Exams. Palace Graduates are announced on a "Golden List." The top three graduates of the Palace Exams are translated here as: Primus Scholar, Secundus Eye, and Tertius Flower.

INNER FORCE: An internal force that circulates through the meridians of the body, which is controlled by martial artists to achieve near supernatural physical feats.

LIGHTNESS ARTS: A kind of martial arts that allows one to practically fly.

MEMORIAL TO THE THRONE: A memorial is an official letter written to the emperor in essay format, and anyone has the right to submit one. In reality, memorials written by someone other than court officials and nobles were often rejected by the secretariat for improper formatting.

MIASMA: Miasma is a noxious vapor that rises from the ground and causes disease. Since the people of the Central Plains had never encountered tropical diseases before, when they came down with malaria, dysentery, and hemorrhagic fevers, they attributed it to these miasmic vapors that rose from the ground. In *The History of Eastern Han*, General Ma Yuan's encounter with the south's miasma is described thus: "Stagnant water below, fog above; poisonous vapor rises."

MILITARY RANKINGS: A lot of the rankings in this novel, such as "Left Guardian" and "Right Guardian," were terms from the Three Kingdoms period. A general is ranked above a commandant, and both left and right guardians (guardians of the field camp) are considered generals. The idea of "left" and "right" is just a way to differentiate between them in this case without needing separate titles.

NINE CHAPTERS OF XIAO AND SHAO: The phrase “when the music of Xiao and Shao reached the ninth movement, phoenixes would come, responding to human virtue” is used to refer to an idealized form of ceremonial music, and it is associated with the legendary Emperor Shun, the last emperor of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. The phoenix is a symbol of celestial blessing and moral order, signifying that the one it visited upon possessed the Mandate of Heaven.

No original source of the music itself survives to this day, but there are reconstructions based on ancient texts that gave us instrument lists and dance formations.

PRINCES, RANKS, AND TITLES: Princes are usually made commandery prince when they come of age (twenty), but only made imperial prince with a bestowed title after they accomplish enough to be granted one, and the title itself is related to this accomplishment. Prince Cheng, for example, means “imperial prince of success,” for expelling the Xiongnu in battle. Even before being granted a title, however, they are considered of superlative rank and above the bureaucracy’s official ranks that go from one to nine, each divided into Proper and Lesser. Dukes, marquises, and other nobles that were granted hereditary titles by the emperor are also of superlative rank. Imperial Prince is a title just below the heir to the throne and the emperor.

SIX MINISTRIES: While the six ministries are technically equal in rank, they differ greatly in terms of influence. The Ministry of Personnel is arguably the most powerful, as it controls the careers of all scholars. This is why Xiao Yuan going from vice minister of revenue to vice minister of personnel is considered a promotion.

SPRING RECKONING: In counting age by spring reckoning, a person is one the moment they’re born, and the age number goes up by one every first day of the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year).

SWORN BROTHERHOOD: Sworn brotherhood (or sisterhood) was a ritual usually between good friends to elevate the relationship by swearing an oath and pledging loyalty to each other. The most famous example of this is the likely fictional Oath of the Peach Garden involving Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu of the state of Shu Han, as depicted in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

THREE OBEDIENCES AND FOUR VIRTUES: This is the social code for women who lived under Confucianism. A woman must obey first her father, then her husband, and then if she is widowed, she must obey her sons. The four virtues are: feminine conduct, feminine speech, feminine comportment, and feminine works. One can sum these up to being "ladylike."

ZHUGE LIANG: Zhuge Liang was an inventor during the Three Kingdoms period following the end of the Han dynasty, and he was also a strategist for Liu Bei and the imperial chancellor for the state of Shu Han. Already recognized as the most accomplished strategist of his era, he was further mythicized by the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, more than a thousand years after the historical events. Some of the items in Mu Hanzhang's wardrobe in this volume were obviously meant to imitate Zhuge Liang, such as his headscarf made of kudzu and a feather fan.

Allegedly, Zhuge Liang could tell the future from the position of the stars, and he would write seemingly prophetic orders for the generals in silken pouches, to be opened when a situation came to pass.

About the Author

Lv Ye Qian He is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City, a member of the China Writers Association, a council member of the Internet Writers Association of Henan, and vice-chair of the Internet Writers Association of Zhengzhou. She's been writing online fiction for fifteen years, specializing in cute and feel-good stories. Her notable works include *The Wife Comes First* and *Mr. Dior.* Her works are popular both in China and abroad, and many have already been adapted into TV dramas, animated series, comics, and radio dramas.

Footnotes

Chapter 86: Chaos

[1] A line from the poem “A Phoenix Seeking Its Mate” by Sima Xiangru about the poet’s lover whom he eloped with.

Chapter 99: Jealousy

[2] From the Tao Te Ching by Laozi.

Chapter 100: Laying Claim

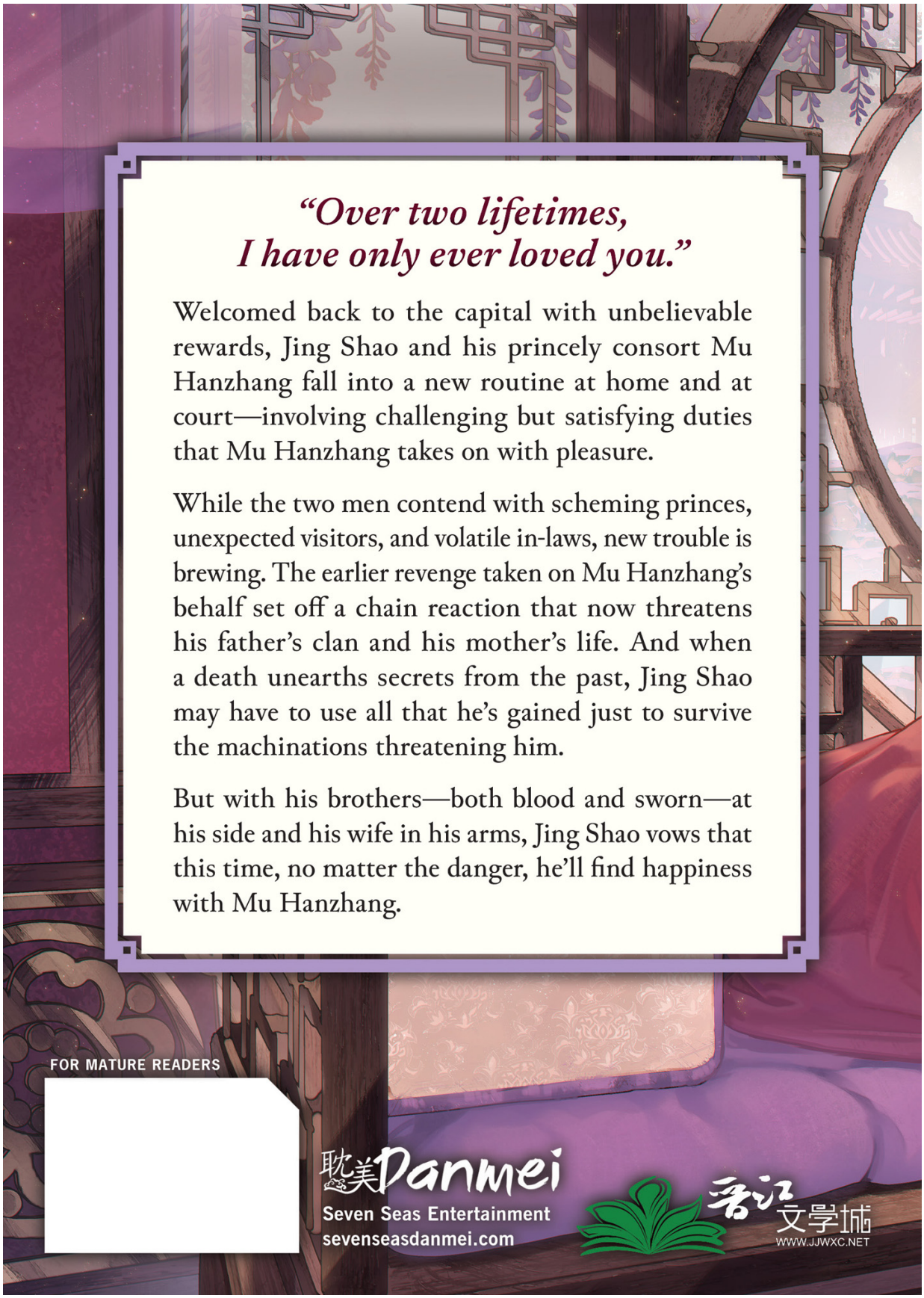
[3] A completely fabricated indicator of chastity invented during the Jin dynasty, said to fade once a woman lost her virginity.

Chapter 102: Cutting Down Grass

[4] An imperial rite held at the beginning of spring where the emperor offered sacrifices to heaven, praying for favorable weather and a good harvest in the coming year.

Chapter 105: The End

[5] The word “qing” can both be a way an emperor addresses his officials and a term of endearment between spouses or very good friends. In oracle script it is written like two people sharing a meal together. In a sentence, it functions the same way as “you.”


*"Over two lifetimes,
I have only ever loved you."*
Welcomed back to the capital with unbelievable rewards, Jing Shao and his princely consort Mu Hanzhang fall into a new routine at home and at court—involving challenging but satisfying duties that Mu Hanzhang takes on with pleasure.
While the two men contend with scheming princes, unexpected visitors, and volatile in-laws, new trouble is brewing. The earlier revenge taken on Mu Hanzhang's behalf set off a chain reaction that now threatens his father's clan and his mother's life. And when a death unearths secrets from the past, Jing Shao may have to use all that he's gained just to survive the machinations threatening him.
But with his brothers—both blood and sworn—at his side and his wife in his arms, Jing Shao vows that this time, no matter the danger, he'll find happiness with Mu Hanzhang.
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